

Restaurant to Another World



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1
NOVEL

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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Restaurant to Another World 1

My heart always races whenever I open the door with the cat sign on it. On the “other side” is a beautiful little shop, but the entrance on “this side” is just a door.

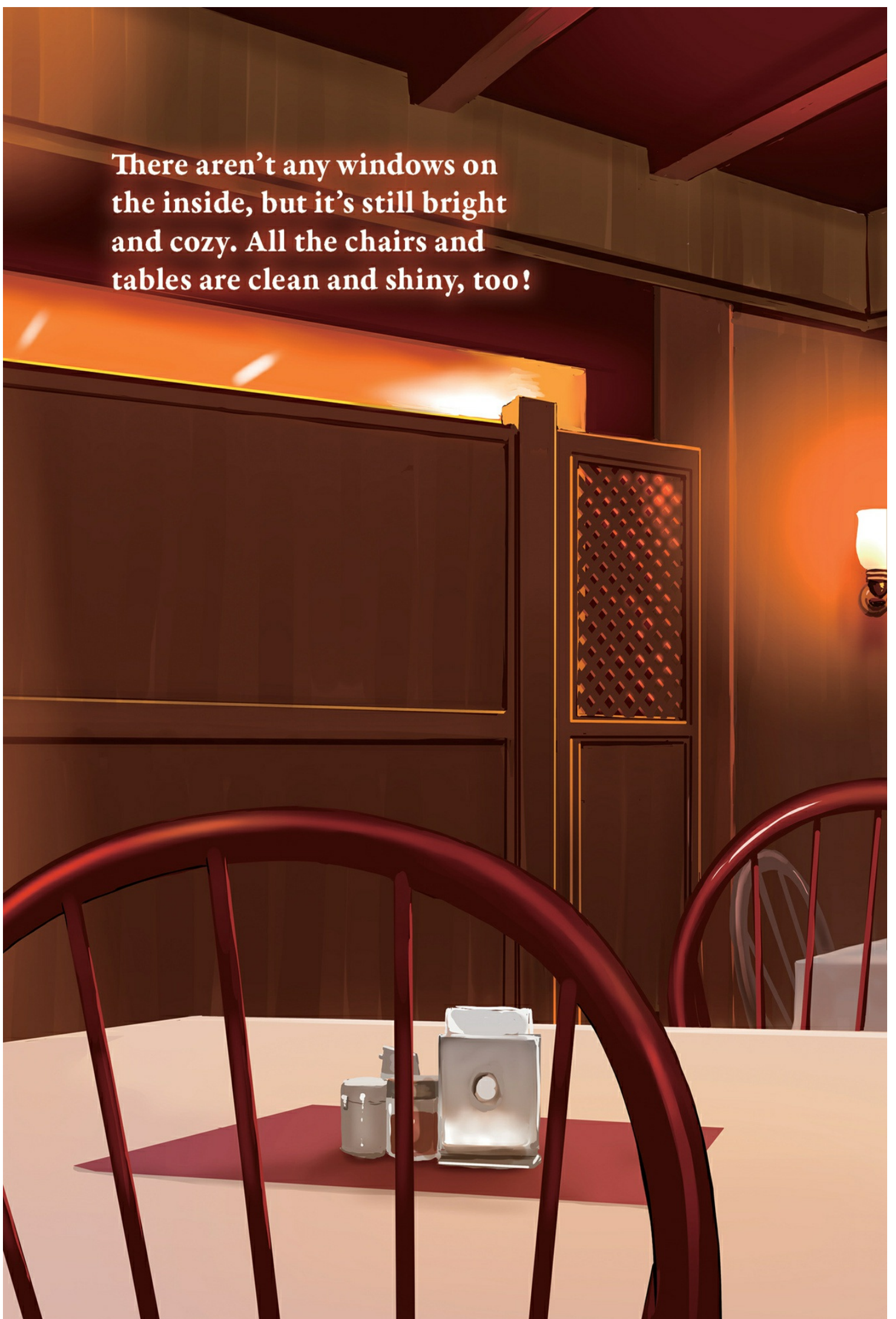
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Junpei Inuzuka

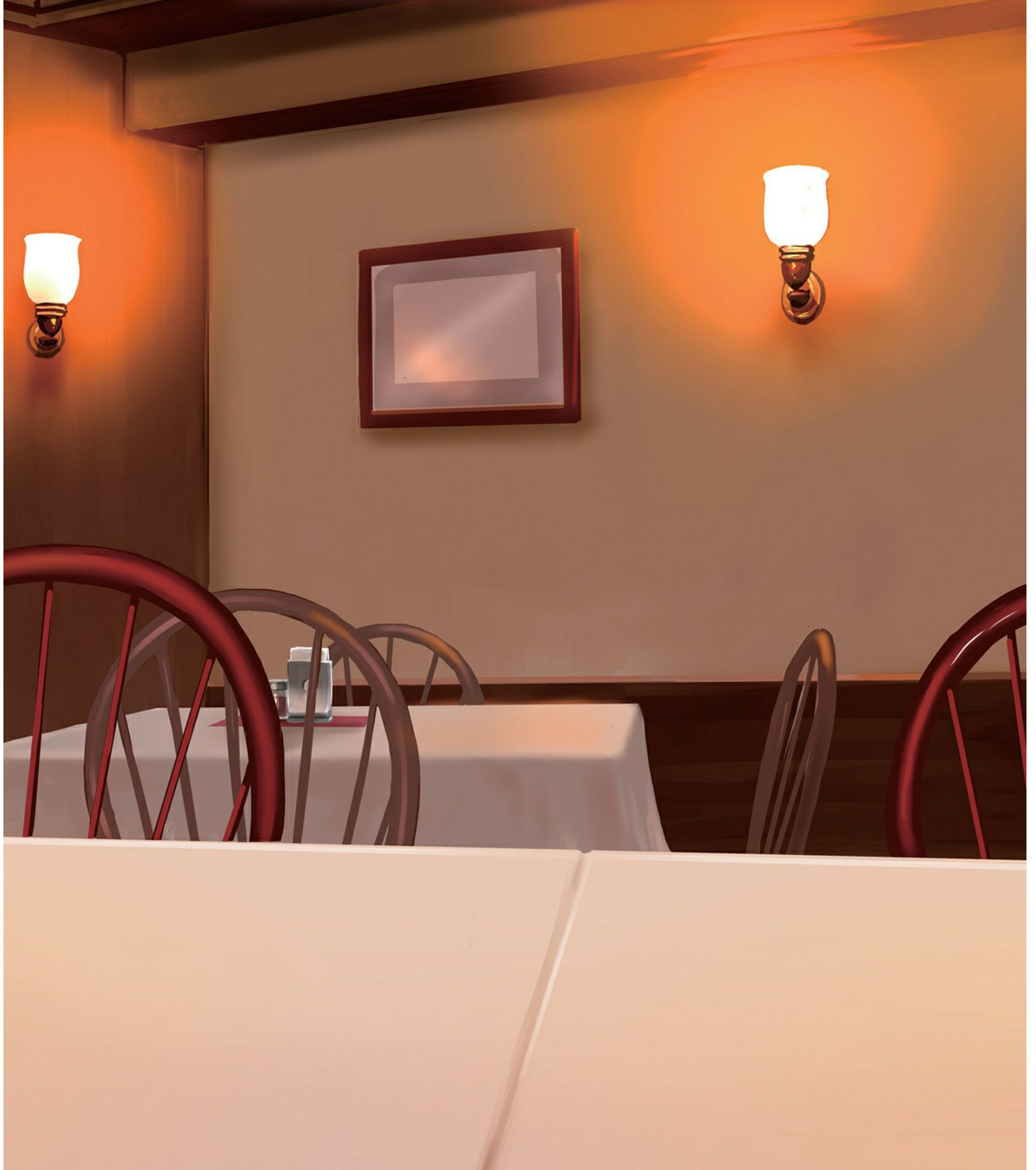
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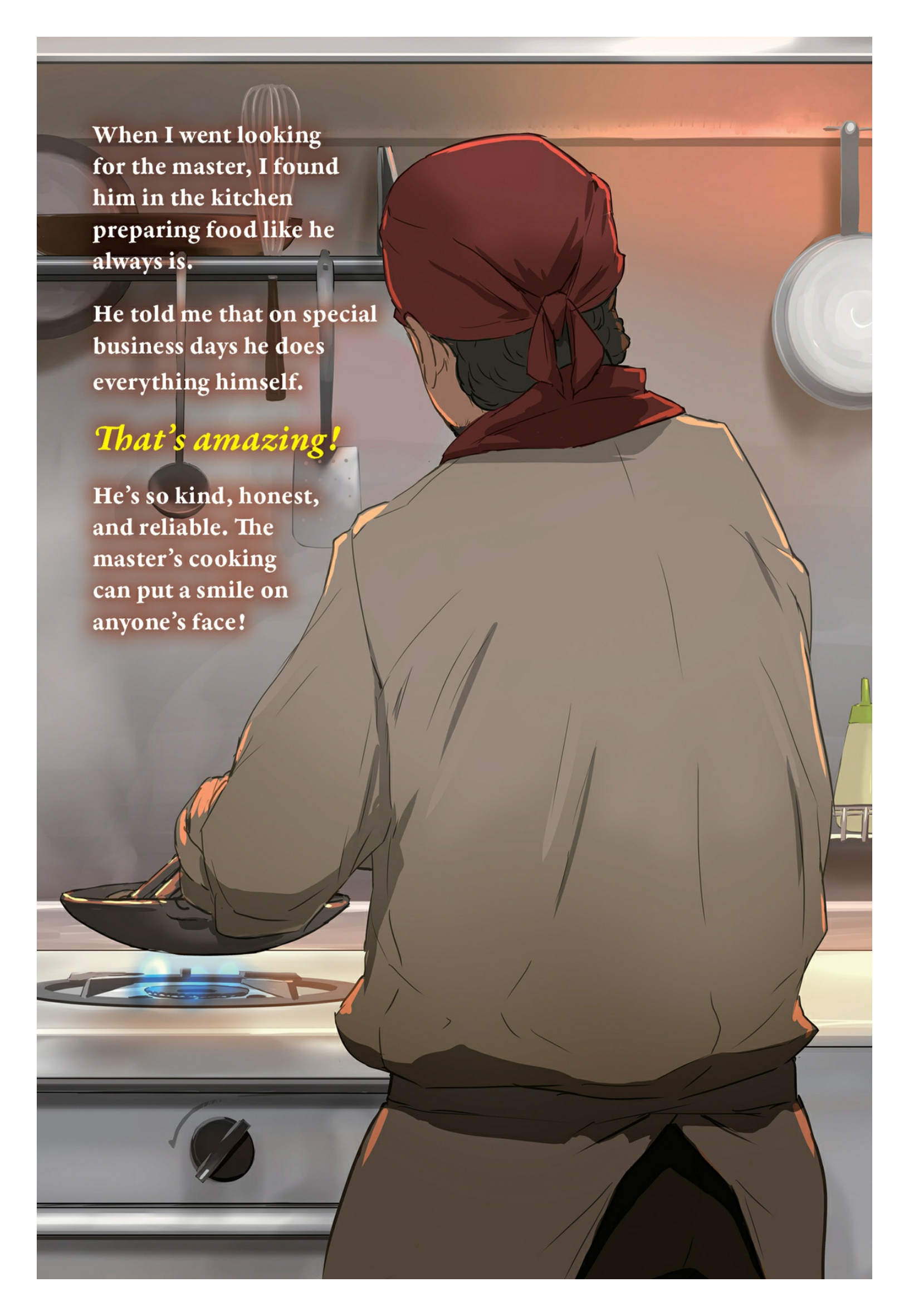
Katsumi Enami

There aren't any windows on the inside, but it's still bright and cozy. All the chairs and tables are clean and shiny, too!



The master told me that this is
just a normal shop on “this side,”
but to me it’s like a wonderland!
I can totally see why this place is so beloved.



A person wearing a red headscarf and a grey long-sleeved shirt is seen from behind, standing in a kitchen. They are holding a black frying pan over a lit gas stove. The kitchen has a wooden backsplash, a metal rack with various utensils (whisk, spatula, ladle), and a white plate hanging on the wall. A green bottle is visible on the counter to the right.

When I went looking
for the master, I found
him in the kitchen
preparing food like he
always is.

He told me that on special
business days he does
everything himself.

That's amazing!

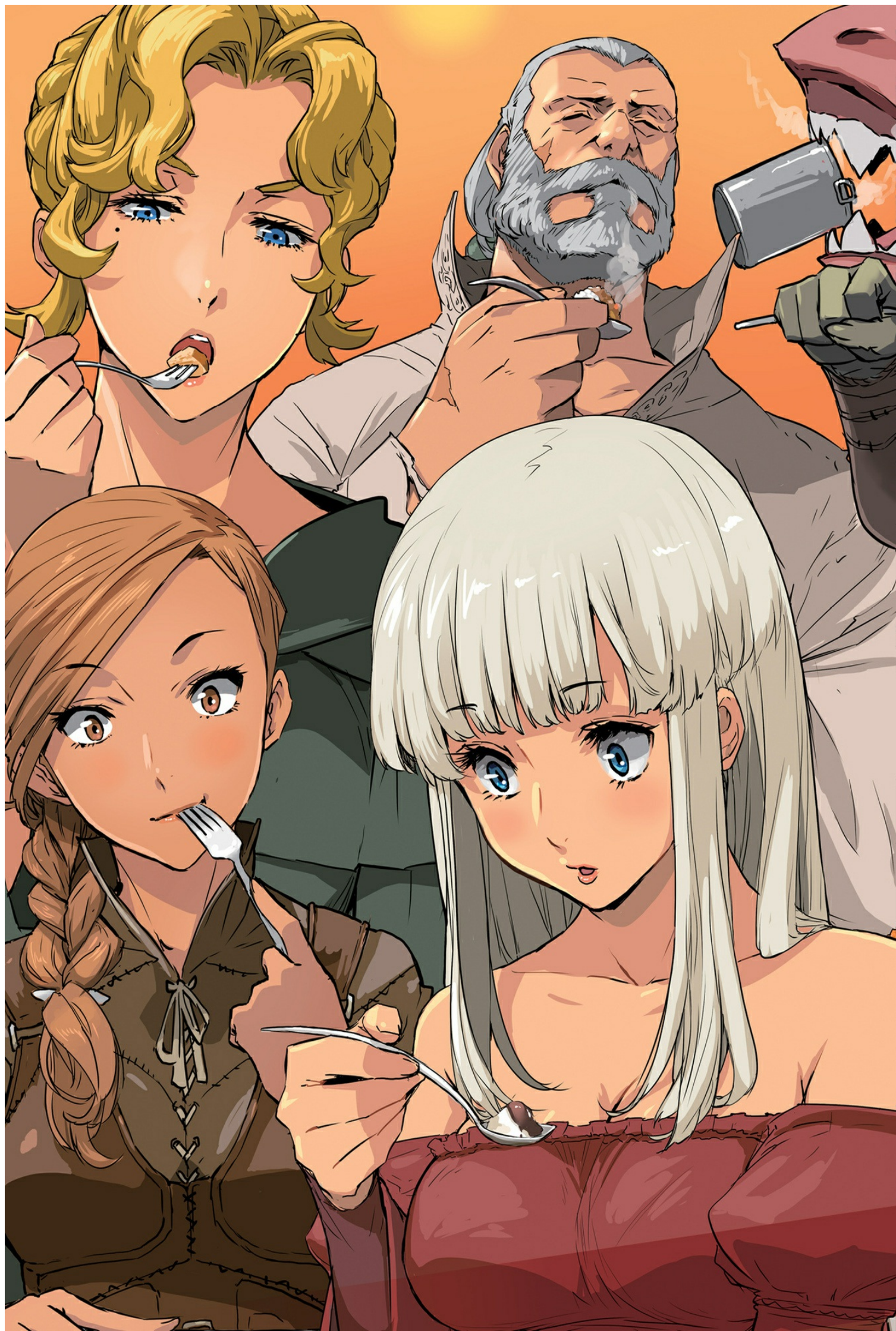
He's so kind, honest,
and reliable. The
master's cooking
can put a smile on
anyone's face!



That reminds
me of the first
thing the master
ever made for
me. He called it
the “breakfast
special.”

Just thinking
about it makes
me feel all
warm and
happy inside.

*I'll never forget how it tasted
for as long as I live!*





The customers who visit the Restaurant to Another World are all pretty unique. There are adventurers, merchants, and even nobles who drop by.

Our regulars include elves, warriors, and diviners. The restaurant is even beloved by a queen who kinda reminds me of a dragon!

I never get enough of seeing their surprised faces as they dig into the master's cooking.

I wonder what kind of customers we'll get today?

Introduction.

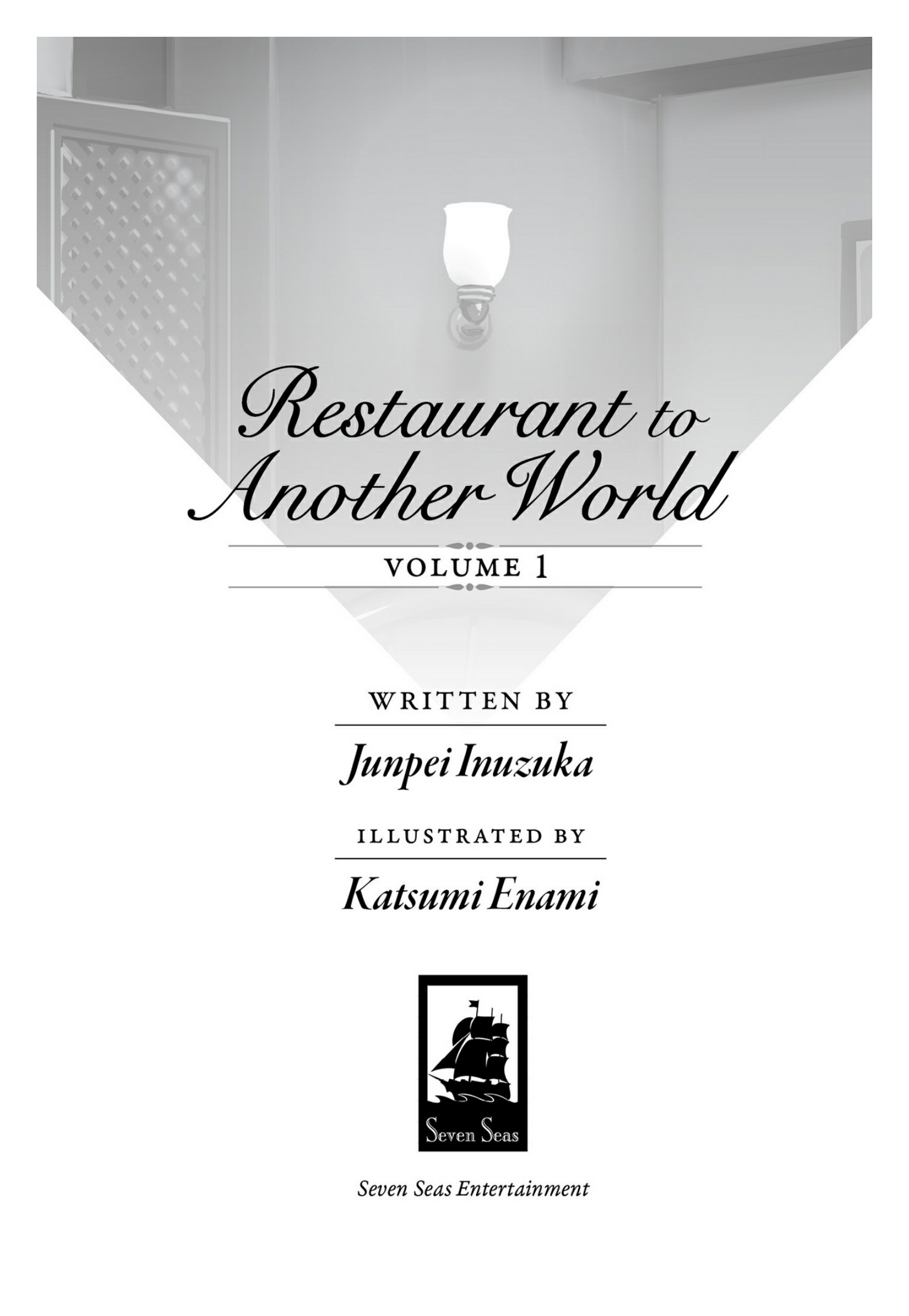
RESTAURANT TO ANOTHER WORLD

Every Saturday is a “**Special Business Day.**” This is the day when our world connects with the other world. If you open the door with the cat sign on it, you’ll find all sorts of amazing foods: minced meat cutlet, ginger pork, curry rice... They even serve okonomiyaki and chocolate parfaits! Today, all kinds of customers seeking surprise and joy will come to...

Western Cuisine Nekoya

Restaurant to Another World is ready to open up shop! The more you read, the more your mouth is going to water. If you happen to be on a diet, you better watch out!





Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 1

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ILLUSTRATED BY

Katsumi Enami



Seven Seas Entertainment

ISEKAI SHOKUDO 1

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Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 1

Nekoya's Menu

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Prologue:

Kitchen Prep

It's been about ten years since I inherited this restaurant from my late gramps.

While it's not dead center in the middle of Tokyo, it's at least in the most buzzing office district in the prefecture. Walk about three minutes from the restaurant and you'll find yourself in a little shopping area. It's a nice spot with all types of eateries lined up on the street. Every day, white collar workers, men and women alike, find their way here to grab lunch. Close to the entrance of this shopping arcade, there's a cozy building three stories tall, with one extra floor beneath the surface. The sign with the winged dog on it helps it stand out.

My restaurant resides in the basement floor of that building.

Its name? "Western Cuisine Nekoya."

The front door, constructed with ebony wood and featuring a brass handle, is something of a rarity in this day and age. In the center of it is a picture of a cat holding its palm up, almost as if it were beckoning customers to come in.

Gramps was much more of a cat man than he was a dog man, which makes it ironic that some fifty years after he started this joint, I, a dog guy, would inherit it. We've been around for quite some time.

The menu is kind of a mishmash of different things, if I'm being perfectly honest. I know "western cuisine" is in the name, but Gramps constantly added stuff to the menu over the years, much of which was definitely not western in shape or form. Back when I had just graduated from college and decided to help out at the restaurant, I asked Gramps about why that was. You see, he wasn't born in Japan. He was born on the mainland. After the war ended, he found himself alone and penniless, so he came back to Japan. I honestly still don't know if any of that is true or not. It would certainly explain why Gramps kinda seemed a little foreign-ish.

He explained to me, "'Western cuisine' refers to dishes from across the ocean, right? Which means just about anything that wasn't originally from

Japan counts as western cuisine, no? Besides, at an eatery, as long as the eating's good, nothing else matters!"

Just for the record, the lunch special for that day was braised pork. Gramps explained all this to me while preparing the staff meal, a hearty helping of sweet cuts of greasy pork served over rice.

So basically, serving stuff other than western cuisine is part of our charm. Of course, it should go without saying that Gramps' and my specialty is still western cuisine. And you know what? We're pretty highly regarded! Gramps' crazy good cooking aside, we give free refills on rice, bread, and soup. The young folks especially love that. Plus, the most expensive thing on the menu is only a thousand yen. Gramps and I were always particular about that.

Fortunately for us, business is always good around lunchtime on the weekdays, when tired workers in the neighborhood swing by and turn the place into a battlefield. It also gets busy at night when those same folks drop in again, along with broke students drawn in by the allure of free bread and rice refills. Let's just say that I'm doing pretty well for myself these days.

And that's Western Cuisine Nekoya, the restaurant I inherited from Gramps. We're open on weekdays from 11 AM to 3 PM for lunchtime and then 5 PM to 9 PM for dinner. We're closed on Saturdays and Sundays, when all of the usual office workers vanish from the shopping arcade. I'm sure you've all figured it out by now, but Nekoya is just an ordinary little eatery.

...Well, except for one kinda, sorta special thing.

One day a week on Saturday, Western Cuisine Nekoya opens for what I like to call a *special* business day. *But wait, didn't you say the place was closed on Saturdays?* Right you are, friend. That's what makes it special.

Since there's no way we can let folks from "this side" into the restaurant during a special business day, we have to close up. At least on the surface, anyway. I can just picture how bad things would go if we didn't. Sheesh.

But look, even I don't have all the answers. Gramps started this whole special business day thing some thirty years ago, when I was still just a tot. I'm sure he probably knew a thing or two about all this, but before he could explain any of it to me, he left this world for the next.

“When I die, this place is yours,” he told me. “If you choose to take over the restaurant, I want you to continue the special business days.” So here I am, doing just as he asked. I’ve made it a point to not think too hard about who the customers are on Saturdays or where they’re from. An eatery should be about the eatin’, right? The customers drop by, I cook them something good to eat, they enjoy it, they pay me. That’s all I really need. It doesn’t matter whether they’re from “this side” or “that side.”

Which is how Western Cuisine Nekoya got its bizarre nickname.

The Restaurant to Another World.

That’s what folks from “that side” call this place.

Chapter 1:

Minced Meat Cutlet It is said that the profession of “adventurer” came into existence some seventy years ago, when four legendary heroes ended the long, long war against the demon race.

Just like that, the number of battlefields around the world began to dwindle (though they never totally disappeared), which meant that mercenaries and soldiers suddenly had to find a new way of living. Some became knights, taking up their swords for nobles, or soldiers of fortune who traveled from rare battlefield to battlefield to make a living. Many abandoned the sword entirely, choosing to become artisans of some type, farmers, or merchants. Sadly, there were even those who pointed their blades at the innocent, choosing to become violent bandits instead.

But among those warriors were a small group who decided to walk a new path in life as adventurers.

Adventurers: those who fought against dangerous monsters and bandits, protected merchants traveling from town to town, solved all kinds of problems in cities, and found riches in the old ruins across the Eastern Continent. In exchange for having the protection of none, they chose to live a life of freedom.

It had been seventy years since the birth of the adventurer. New adventurers were born every day, but not all of them found their way into great fortune. There were only a small number who won riches and great renown. Greater in number were those who retired in peace, having found some moderate success in their craft. Even greater in number were the poor fools who eventually ended up as corpses in some dark cave.

This is the tale of one adventurer on a quest of rediscovery.

Her name was Sarah. She was a type of adventurer called a treasure hunter: one who specialized in extracting riches from ruins.

She carefully made her way down the rope, descending into the darkness of the ruins.

I'm sure it's supposed to be today. But that's why I have to be more careful than ever, she thought to herself, keeping tabs on her surroundings. She had traversed through this cave multiple times. In fact, she already knew the whole route from the entrance to her destination by heart. Sarah had even taken out any and all monsters that were lurking in the area. That, however, was no excuse to let her guard down, and she knew it.

Like hell I'm gonna be one of those jokers who ends up dying just before getting their hands on the goods.

“If you let your guard down during the last stretch, you end up paying the price more often than not.” When Sarah was much younger, her treasure hunter cousin had made sure to hammer that point into her head.

Unfortunately, that very same cousin would go on to find a secret room connected to the final area of some elven ruins and go missing the very next day. Sarah was well aware of the fact that their body was never found, and so she promised to abide by the words they left for her. It was thanks to her caution that she ultimately arrived at her final destination unscathed.

“What the heck?” Sarah raised her voice, confused at the sight before her.

Five years ago, the legendary treasure hunter, William Gold, passed away. He spent his final years in a small mining town. It was rumored that he settled in this dry town some ten years ago because he had hidden part of his vast collection of treasures within the mines.

Needless to say, this was all hearsay. Even his remaining relatives in the Gold Firm, one of the very few large merchant families in the Kingdom, had no public records of William leaving behind any hidden treasure. However, the reason Sarah came to this old town was because she got her hands on William Gold's journal from his final years. According to his writings, after moving here, he would visit the mines every seven days without fail.

Today is the Day of Satur. Time to go to the mines. William left behind few other words on the subject but always made sure to make note of this “Day of Satur” every seven days. For as long as his body allowed it, he would go to the mines on this very specific day. When he eventually succumbed to illness and

was confined to bed, he would still write in his journal, *Today is the Day of Satur... If only my cursed body could still move.*

At one point, perhaps as a result of his old age, he visited the mines on the eighth day. Alongside a flurry of curses, all William noted about that day was that it was “a massive waste of time.”

Despite her age, Sarah was a talented treasure hunter. Compared to other youngsters and assorted bandits, she felt confident that she was a step above the rest. Her instincts cried out to her that this journal was the real deal and that she needed to visit the mines on the very same day that William had: the “Day of Satur.”

Thoughts of William’s secret treasure filled her mind as she infiltrated the old mines. She found a secret passage that he’d hidden, one that no rookie treasure hunter would ever be able to find on their own. Sarah’s journey down this path would put her against monsters that only professionals could handle. She eventually drew up a map, figured out a safe path to her goal, and today, on this “Day of Satur,” finally made her way to the deepest part of the mines...

That was when she saw it.

A door.

On this door was painted a cat, but even stranger was the sign hanging from it. Written across it were strange characters that even Sarah, well versed in the languages of both the Western and Eastern Continent, as well as that of the elves and the dwarves, could not read. As of yesterday, this ivory door had not existed.

“It’s a door...right?”

After examining it briefly, Sarah found that the door wasn’t rigged with any sort of traps. Heck, it wasn’t even locked. This meant that she could go in immediately if she so chose to.

“Well, I’m not going to get any farther unless I go through it!” Sarah said.

Thinking over it briefly, Sarah decided to enter the door. She had prepared for the day that she would finally come face to face with William’s legacy. She even brought an elixir with her, a medicine that could heal all manner of major

wounds in one gulp, and outfitted herself with the best equipment before coming here. There was no turning back.

“If I die here, I guess it’ll just prove that I wasn’t much of a treasure hunter. Here goes nothing.”

Ring, ring.

The sound of a bell rang out from the other side of the door.

An alarm?! Sarah instinctively drew her trusty dagger and took a defensive stance.

“Welcome. Can I ask you to put the blade away, ma’am?”

Inside the door was a single middle-aged man with a somewhat exasperated look on his face, asking her to tuck her dagger away.

“What the heck?” she said for the second time.

A little while later...

“Nekoya?” After putting her dagger away, Sarah asked the restaurant’s master about his strange “business.”

“Well, yeah. Just an ordinary Western... er, eatery.”

“An eatery, this deep in the mines?”

The master raised his shoulders in response to Sarah’s question. “Mines? Ah, I’m guessing you used the same door William did to come here, ma’am.”

“The door William used...” In response to the master’s answer, Sarah turned back to look at the entrance she came through earlier. It was a large door made of black ivory with a gold bell hanging from the top and a picture of a cat with its right paw raised on the front.

“Is it some sort of magic item?”

Examining it once more, Sarah realized that the tiny bell contained incredibly strong magic energies within it. In response to her question, the master nodded his head.

“Yeah, you could say that. Not that I really get how it all works. One of the old regulars here says it bends space-time and creates a bunch of ‘doors’ in another world. That said, it only connects once every seven days.”

“Another world?” asked Sarah. “Are you saying I’m in another world?”

She immediately scanned the inside of the restaurant. The gods and demons of old who left this world behind also created all sorts of parallel realms. The demon realm, hell, the heavenly realm, the mirror world, the fairy kingdom... All of these could be called “other worlds.” Although Sarah never personally visited one, other more famous treasure hunters such as William Gold had traveled to them and brought back powerful items, like a staff made from the wood of the Holy Tree. William even sold it to the great sage, one of the four legendary heroes, for a large sum of money. It was a famous story among treasure hunters.

And so Sarah herself didn’t doubt the existence of other worlds. She simply found it hard to believe that the restaurant she was standing in was one of them.

“It looks pretty normal to me... Or not.”

This time, Sarah looked at her surroundings with the eye of a pro treasure hunter, and she immediately changed her mind. This was nothing like the “restaurants” she was familiar with.

The room appeared to be cut away from a larger basement, with no windows anywhere to be found. On the ceiling were orbs of light, most likely powered by magic, that warmly lit the interior as if it were the middle of the day. Both the chairs and tables were kept in pristine condition as well. Said tables were set with fairly expensive looking glasses and small, porcelain water pitchers.

Things like this were impossible to find in all but the most expensive of restaurants, and yet there was no sign of any servants. If anything, it looked as if the whole place was run by the one man in front of her.

“We’re just an ordinary little restaurant, you know?” he said. “How about it. Care to grab a bite? Things are gonna get kinda rowdy here in a bit, but since it’s still early, I’ve got some free time on my hands.”

“Sure,” Sarah said doubtfully. “I guess I’ll give it a try.”

A meal recommended to her by a total stranger. Sarah initially wondered if it was some sort of trap but remembered that this was the place William had been so enamored with: a Restaurant to Another World. She couldn’t help but be interested in the food that captured his very heart.

“Glad to hear it! Sit wherever you’d like.” With that, the master retreated to the kitchen.

Food from another world, huh? she thought to herself. *What am I going to be served? I hope it’s not anything too strange.*

Sarah grabbed herself a seat and took a closer look at the objects on her table. At the far edge were a series of glasses: one filled with some sort of red liquid, another filled with what she assumed to be salt of a sort. One of the containers appeared to have a bunch of tiny, sharp wooden sticks in it. There were tags on them, most likely explaining their purpose, but unfortunately they were all written in the language of a world that Sarah was unfamiliar with.

The master returned from the back as she examined the strange black liquid and white particles in the containers. “Ma’am, can you read the Eastern Continent’s language?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” Sarah nodded her head.

The Eastern Continent’s language had been used since ancient times. A resident of the land herself, Sarah would not have survived as a treasure hunter if she could not read or write.

“Then here’s our menu. Take your time!”

The master then handed her a sharp-cornered menu card written in the language of the Eastern Continent and placed a transparent cup filled with ice and water in front of her.

“Excuse me, I didn’t order any water,” Sarah grumpily replied as she watched him.

While it was true that she was thirsty and considered ordering water, it’d be bad news if she let the strange man impose his will on her. Coming from a long

line of merchants, Sarah was careful when it came to matters of money. In this day and age, acquiring ice water required the use of magic, which meant paying upward of a silver coin. There was no way she was going to let this man force her to pick up the bill.

Much to her surprise, however, the master simply laughed at her response. “Oh, the lemon water is on the house. Refills are free, too, so help yourself!”

The master once again returned to the kitchen, beginning his work within Sarah’s line of sight.

“What’s with this place?” It appeared as though this really was another world. Having once again confirmed this for herself, she took a sip of the water from her cup.

It was cold and delicious. There was just a hint of fruit juice in the water, giving it a refreshing taste that spread throughout her mouth. After spending ages traversing the old mines, this was enough to bring her back to life. Without her even realizing it, all the stress in her body began to fade away. Considering the hard-to-argue price of free, she gulped down the water as she looked over the menu. There she found all sorts of dishes written in the language of the Eastern Continent...but none that she recognized.

“Hm. I think I know what I’m getting into with roasted beef and the like, but I have no idea what the rest of this is.”

Next to the name of each dish was a single sentence explaining what it was. As far as she could tell, the Western Continent beyond the ocean had a great many dishes that utilized rice. There were also dishes that utilized fried bread crumbs of some kind. These were all foods well outside of Sarah’s knowledge.

“Honestly, I’m not sure what to order... Oh.”

Sarah’s eyes found their way to a particular menu item just as she was beginning to feel lost. The daily special. Apparently, it was a dish that changed every day, recommended by the master. It was even two silver coins cheaper than everything else.

After taking a look at it, Sarah decided to go with the special. Since she wasn’t sure what was good anyway, she thought she might as well go with the

cheapest item on the menu.

“Are you ready to order, ma’am?” the master asked.

“Yes. I’ll have the daily special, please.”

“Great. That’s one daily special coming right up. Please wait a moment,” the master replied.

“Oh, excuse me!” Sarah called out to the master just as he was returning to the kitchen.

“Yes?”

“Um, what exactly is today’s special?” Sarah didn’t expect to recognize the name but thought to ask anyway.

“Um, let’s see... Hah hah, this must be fate.” The master laughed out loud as he went on to explain. “It’s minced meat cutlet. It was William’s favorite dish.”

The master retreated back into the kitchen, and Sarah heard the sounds of oil sizzling a moment later. She tried to piece things together.

Looks like this really is the reason why William Gold settled here in his final years.

Once every seven days... A suspicious little restaurant that could only be visited on the “Day of Satur.” This was what William meant. Looking at all the information available to her, it was clear that this little place was the reason why William settled in this old mining town.

Which would mean that the food here has to be even better than the fancy joints in the capital, right?

William used the fortune that he acquired in life and business to build a spectacular mansion in the capital. The most prosperous city in all of the Eastern Continent, the capital was where all manner of people and things gathered, including the most delicious of restaurants.

As far as Sarah was aware, in his late years, William was known in the capital to be one of the wealthiest men of them all. He had more than enough money to spend on good food should he have so wished. Yet despite all of that, he still chose to live here, near this specific restaurant. The only conclusion to be

drawn was that the food was on another level.

Eventually, the master returned to Sarah with her plate.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here’s your minced meat cutlet set.”

The master placed down several different dishes in front of Sarah. A quick glance at the various foods in front of her served as further confirmation that this really was a Restaurant to Another World. That was just how beyond her experience all of this was.

The large dish in front of her held two large, brown, sizzling balls the size of an adult’s fist. Next to those sat a fruit sliced into four pieces and a mixture of steamed vegetables and pasta with a white sauce over them. On the other side was a pile of delicately cut fresh vegetables.

The plate next to that one had two pieces of bread on it with what appeared to be butter wrapped in some kind of silver paper. Last but not least was a bowl of soup with minced onions and smoked meat floating in it.

Sarah’s stomach let out a roar. She hadn’t eaten since leaving the inn earlier that day. Her face turned bright red as the master smiled and let out a laugh.



“Free refills on the bread and soup, so feel free to dig in. Give me a holler if you want more! Oh, and the minced meat cutlet tastes even better with the sauce in the pitcher and a dash of lemon juice on it.”

He pointed at the porcelain pitcher with the blue lid.

“Please enjoy!”

And just like that, the master returned to the kitchen, leaving only Sarah and the delicious smelling lunch set in front of her.

“What the?! This is amazing!”

Sarah went for the soup first, thinking she knew what to expect from it. Instead, her mouth was overwhelmed by an unexpected mix of flavors. The sweetness of the oranie (onion in the other world) combined with the savory nature of the dried meat was one thing. However, while it seemed like those were the only two things in the soup, it was actually filled with the flavors of various other vegetables and meat. These various flavors intermingled without overpowering any single element, leading to a refreshing taste.

She drank it all in a single gulp.

The soup alone was far beyond anything she’d ever had at a restaurant before.

“Oh gosh, it’s so soft!”

Next up was the bread. Sarah could barely contain her shock at how soft it was. How was this possible? It was white bread, but so much softer than anything she’d eaten at home. Just putting some of the butter from the mysterious silver wrapping on it was enough to make it taste incredible. The salty flavor of the melted butter combined with the soft and sweet flour of the bread brought out its taste in the best of ways.

It was gone in the blink of an eye.

“Excuse me! Could I get refills on the bread and soup?!” Sarah called.

“Sure, coming right up!”

Sarah then turned her attention to the main course: the mysterious brown

objects. She pointed her knife and fork at the minced meat cutlet.

She was salivating despite being confronted with a food that didn't particularly look delicious from the outside. This was all brand new to Sarah, but as far as she was concerned, if the bread and soup were *that* good, the main course must be on a different level. There was simply no way it could be bad.

At some point, her initial cautiousness turned into expectation. She carefully used her knife to cut a sizable portion of the cutlet off. Just as her knife entered the ball, meat juices began to flow out from the toasty brown opening. As far as she could tell, the food in question was made of delicately minced meats. With all the expectation in the world, she brought the fork to her mouth.

"...Wha?"

That was all she could say. That's how delicious it was.

The meat's plentiful juices mixed with the lightly-textured coating, saturated with fine oil, as they burst and flowed out in her mouth. It was a simultaneous rush of meat, seasoned with just the right balance of salt and pepper, bringing out the best of the meat as well as the oranie mixed in with it.

It was as if Sarah had been invited into a delicious new world of possibilities.

"O-oh, that's right. He said this tastes good with lemon juice and sauce over it."

Having already devoured one of the two minced meat cutlets whole, Sarah recalled the master's words and carefully cut the remaining cutlet in two before grabbing the blue pitcher.

She slowly tilted the opening toward the cutlet, and a thick brown sauce came flowing out and onto it. The dark, thick sauce covered the light fried coating of the meat. Sarah then reached for a lemon and squeezed some of its juice onto the cutlet. It absorbed the fruit juice and softened just a tiny bit. Once again, Sarah brought the meat to her mouth...

What came next was complete silence. If there was time to speak, there was time to enjoy the flavor more.

The complex arrangement of flavors in the sauce was heightened by the

sourness of the lemon. Adding those new elements to the cutlet somehow made the first one she had eaten lack a certain something by comparison. What the flavorful meat juice and sweet oranie lacked was sourness. By adding this sauce and lemon, a fruit with practically no sweetness at all, the minced meat cutlet had evolved into its perfect form.

The meat and coating alone should have been more than enough to satisfy one's hunger. Just a few bites and the heaviness would normally kick in, forcing a diner to stop in their tracks. This is where the sourness came in, balancing all these elements together to leave a person feeling refreshed rather than heavy.

One could eat this forever. It was nothing less than the food of the gods in the celestial realm.

Sarah then went on to order seconds of her minced meat cutlet. Occasionally she would reach for more bread or soup. The master eventually instructed her to sandwich the cutlet between bread and a leafy vegetable (called lettuce in the other world). As expected, the texture and flavor of the cutlet melded perfectly with that of the bread and the lettuce. All she had done was put the foods together, and yet, somehow, she felt they had become an entirely new dish.

Eventually, Sarah placed her fork and knife on the table when she reached the absolute limit of what her stomach could hold.

"Whew... That was incredible."

She took out a silver coin and multiple copper coins, placing them on the table.

"Thanks a bunch," the master said. After checking the payment, he handed Sarah a bag. "Oh, ma'am, would you mind taking this?"

"What is it?"

"Takeout."

The master thought back on when one of his regulars was still alive and well, smiled sadly, and explained the contents to Sarah. "It's a minced meat cutlet sandwich. William would always order one of these with his favorite meal. Since you looked like you were enjoying the food so much, I just kinda ended up

making one out of habit. It's totally on the house, so please take it with you. It's still dang good when cold, but I recommend eating it as soon as you get the chance."

"Are you sure?" she asked, surprised by the master's offer. Given how full she'd become, she wasn't exactly ready to eat more. That said, she knew she'd want to taste that amazing meal again once her load lightened. Plus, she had only just discovered how great this sandwich thing was. If she wasn't so full, she'd probably cram it down now.

"Absolutely. Let's just say this one's on William," he said.

"Then I'll take you up on your offer." Sarah nodded at the master and took the bag from his hands. The still-warm sauce emanated an aroma that somehow managed to stimulate her appetite despite her full stomach.

"I'll be going. Bye now."

"Thank you for coming. We look forward to your next visit."

Just like that, Sarah turned toward the exit. She opened the door, greeted with the familiar sound of the bell ringing, and looked out into the old mine.

"Oh, one question..."

Sarah turned when she heard the master behind her.

"How did William...?"

"I hear he went peacefully. If anything, he seemed frustrated that he couldn't come here anymore," she answered.

And with that, the door closed behind her and disappeared, leaving only the quiet, old mine in its wake.

"The legendary treasure hunter's final hidden treasure..." Sarah mused. She stared at the now-empty wall where the door once was, thinking over all that had happened. "I get it now. A hidden treasure truly worthy of William Gold."

William had been poor as a child. Sarah recalled hearing that her great-grandfather was something of a foodie.

Sarah Gold, the budding young treasure hunter and up-and-coming ladyship

of the massive merchant organization, the Gold Firm, hurried home. She couldn't wait until the next Day of Satur.

Chapter 2:

Teriyaki The cold air poked and prodded at the man through his thick mantle as he opened the out-of-place door sitting atop the mountain.

Looks like it's winter over there, too, he thought.

Tatsugorou let the warm air from beyond the door wash over him. He could always tell what season it was at the restaurant based on the temperature of the air coming out from beyond the door. If it was cold, that meant it was summer. If it was warm, it was winter. The strange, otherworldly contraption known as the “air conditioner” was truly a miracle of sorts. Summers were cold, and winters were warm. How magnificent!

In fact, this Restaurant to Another World couldn't be compared to your everyday inn or tavern. Tatsugorou had many connections, which meant that he'd been able to visit all manner of royalty and nobility in their castles. Even those places stood no chance against this tiny restaurant.

“Master, I'm here,” he called.

Hating the notion of being dependent on others, Tatsugorou had taken his family's most prized blade and set off when he was young, away from his country in the Western Continent. He depended on the sword skills that he'd spent years refining in his homeland, defeating monsters and evildoers alike for the past thirty years. Now, as he announced his presence to the master, his own country's dialect had faded away over the years.

“Welcome!”

The once young, now middle-aged man who'd inherited the restaurant from its original, older owner greeted him in return. Upon hearing his voice, Tatsugorou immediately thought of the previous master. When Tatsugorou had first started coming here many moons ago, that man looked much older than even he did now.

“...I suppose time affects us all.” He let out a pained laugh.

Now that Tatsugorou thought about it, ten years had already passed since the new master took over the restaurant. Back then, you could still argue that he was just a young man, but now he had a look of dignity about him and the belly to back it up. His face had matured quite a bit as well.

In the ten years that had passed, old dishes that the previous master used to cook eventually vanished, replaced by new recipes and meals. Old timers Tatsugorou had gotten to know when he first started coming here stopped coming, giving way to all manner of newcomers.

“O-ho, excuse me, little lady. Just passing through.”

On his way to his normal spot, Tatsugorou slipped past a new face: a familiar-looking female adventurer with a big smile on her face as she dug into a minced meat cutlet and cabbage doused in a healthy portion of sauce. His regular seat was all the way in the back of the restaurant, closest to the kitchen. He placed down his samurai sword, his treasured partner for many years, and took a seat. Tatsugorou let out a sigh of comfort as he settled in as usual.

“...It’s been a month, eh, ‘Teriyaki’?”

The customer sitting next to him spoke. Out of everyone still coming to the restaurant, this man was the oldest of them all. The elderly gentleman wore a tattered robe of sorts, his thin body barely filling it out. Despite looking like he could break at a moment’s notice, the older man was nursing a glass filled with golden beer, enjoying the sounds of oil popping from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’ve been busy with work. Looks like you’re doing the same as always, ‘Pork Loin Cutlet,’” Tatsugorou replied to the other regular, whom he’d known the longest of anyone here.

A tradition at the restaurant was to call each other by nicknames, typically the person’s favorite food. Nobody was quite sure who started this or when, but it quickly became the unspoken rule.

“Ha ha ha. The day I can’t drink beer or eat cutlet is the day I die!” Pork Loin Cutlet let out a hearty burp after taking a bite of his sauce-and-mustard-drenched meat. It was simultaneously gross to watch while undeniably appetizing.

Absurd. I can't believe he's actually a sage of great wisdom. Tatsugorou quietly laughed to himself. He knew that the poorly mannered man sitting with him, "Pork Loin Cutlet", was none other than one of the four heroes who had led humanity to victory during the Demon War. He had mastered all kinds of magic, gathered profound knowledge, and was known by even those in the boonies as a legendary sage. He was undoubtedly a household name.

In his thirty years traveling across the world, Tatsugorou had used his sword to cut down a variety of monsters, saving towns and people everywhere as a foreign swordsman. He was fairly certain the man next to him knew his true name as well. However, none of that mattered. The only people here were a guy who loved teriyaki and another man who loved pork loin cutlet. Just two drinking buddies.

"Sir, are you ready to place your order?"

"Ah, yes. I'll have the usual. Teriyaki chicken, please. Oh, and bring out the rice first. A side dish of pickled veggies, too. Let's see... Some seishu as well."

Tatsugorou gave his order to the master, who came out with just the right timing.

"Yup, you got it. The usual."

Long since used to this, the master went to the back and quickly brought out what was asked of him.

"Here you go. A bowl of rice, some pickled vegetables, and today's miso soup with tofu and wakame."

The master placed the aforementioned foods on the table in front of the swordsman. The arrangement of dishes in front of Tatsugorou was perhaps the main reason why he adored this restaurant so much. He couldn't help but nod with glee, thrilled at the sight.

Now this is what I'm talking about.

Tatsugorou quickly grabbed a pair of chopsticks, picked up the rice bowl, and took a bite. The sweet and gentle aroma of the rice spread throughout his mouth. The clear, hot, white grains he was chewing on were a far cry from the flavorless brown rice he used to eat in his homeland.

Each bite of rice served to spread its sweetness further throughout Tatsugorou's mouth. After getting the full experience of its flavor, he swallowed it down and took a bite of the pickled vegetables off to the side. Each bite of the bran-pickled yellow radish, traditionally crafted during the winter by the craftsmen in the "shopping district," produced a crunching noise. The strong saltiness washed away the sweetness left behind by the rice.

"Phew..." Tatsugorou let out a sigh of satisfaction without even realizing it. Unlike the Eastern Continent, the tradition of baking bread hadn't yet spread to the west, so these flavors reminded him of his days of eating rice back at home across the ocean. While he certainly didn't dislike the delicious white bread one could only eat here, he couldn't help but feel that the rice was more delicious, perhaps because it reminded him of the home he hadn't returned to since he left.

If anything, the rice here is so good that I can't imagine returning home to a place without miso or soy sauce.

Tatsugorou continued to enjoy his rice, thinking his silly thoughts. White rice, miso soup, and pickled vegetables. It was a habit of his to enjoy these to their fullest before the main course arrived.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Here's your teriyaki chicken and seishu."

At last, the star of this little show had arrived. The large chunks of chicken meat were doused in sweet and sour sauce and cooked to perfection. This was teriyaki chicken, the food and flavor of this restaurant that Tatsugorou had fallen in love with over twenty years ago.

This is it.

He was ready to dig into the chicken. Tatsugorou used his chopsticks to grab one of the thin pieces. The translucent brown teriyaki sauce on the bronzed skin of the chicken juxtaposed with the pure, almost virginal white meat made for a beautiful sight.

The swordsman took a moment to enjoy the visual splendor before him and then took a bite. The moist skin had been drained of any excess grease, making for a stupendous texture with the tender chicken meat. With each bite, the remaining fat from the skin, thick sweet and sour soy sauce, and salt combined

with the young chicken's own overflowing juices.

Oh, my. This is bad.

Tatsugorou quickly ate another mouthful of rice. By itself, the flavor of the teriyaki chicken could be a bit overwhelming. That's why pairing it with the light sweetness of the rice brought the dish to its perfect form. Tatsugorou was aware of this as he continued to down more rice, letting it absorb the teriyaki juices, creating the perfect storm of flavor.

...Mm.

Tatsugorou could do nothing but nod his head in appreciation. It was this combination of sweet and sour deliciousness that made him feel this was the best way to indulge in rice at this restaurant.

Long ago, he once got into a heated debate about this with "Curry Rice" and "Omelet Rice," two other regulars. Tatsugorou wore a smile on his face, still eating his rice as he recalled how that conversation almost became a real fight.

What exactly was the most delicious dish at Nekoya? Its regulars often debated the merits of each dish, but due to the wide variety of foods the master was able to cook, they had yet to come to any sort of unanimous conclusion.

Finally, the time came to indulge in the alcohol from another world, seishu. He took a bite of the teriyaki chicken and followed it up with his drink. First, he downed about half of the seishu in the cup, enjoying the burning sensation it left in his throat and the rush of fruity fragrance that traveled through his nose. After that, he went on to take small sips here and there so as to avoid getting drunk.

Tatsugorou's favorite way of enjoying the alcohol meant the first taste would always be by itself. He then followed that up with a bite of teriyaki chicken and further sips. The clear, almost water-like liquid in his cup wasn't entirely dissimilar to the dwarves' favorite type of booze, brandy. Both drinks were quite strong, but seishu had a fruity aroma to it that he was fond of. The heat of the alcohol blended well with the sweet flavoring of the teriyaki chicken.

This alcohol was unique to this other world. Of course, the restaurant had

familiar varieties of drink such as wine and beer, but it also had a variety of other drinks made only in the other world. The best part? All of them were delicious. According to some rumors he once heard, there was a dwarf brewer who came here on the Day of Satur to drink and spent years trying to recreate the delicious otherworldly drinks he enjoyed so much. Only recently had his efforts born fruit, with dwarves claiming that it was the best alcohol they'd ever had. However, the brewer himself was said to still be dissatisfied with his own creation.

This meant that Tatsugorou was unlikely to ever enjoy seishu outside of this otherworldly restaurant. Not while he was still alive, anyhow.

"Hm, that teriyaki chicken sure looks good..." Pork Loin Cutlet quietly whispered to himself while Tatsugorou enjoyed his meal.

"I'd be willing to trade you something for this middle piece," Tatsugorou offered to his old friend. He was well aware that while rice and teriyaki chicken were the best possible combination of foods, rice and pork loin cutlet also went together quite well.

"Can't I get a piece from the end?"

"No way, pal. If you're gonna be like that, order some for yourself." Tatsugorou refused to budge on this.

And so they continued to exchange friendly banter as the two of them enjoyed their meals. Drinks were drunk, conversations had, and teriyaki chicken exchanged for the delicious center of a pork loin cutlet. The fun times rolled by...

"Well then, I suppose if I don't get back soon, my pupils won't let me hear the end of it."

Pork Loin Cutlet, legendary sage that he was, had a host of pupils that he taught. As he stood up to leave, so too did Tatsugorou prepare to depart.

"Hey, Master. I'm leaving the money here."

Tatsugorou grabbed his wallet from his pocket and took out a few silver coins, placing them on the table. He made a habit of including a few extra coins each time to make up for when he was young and poor, when the old master would

frequently turn the other cheek or give him discounts. This was his way of paying back the favor.

“Looks good! Thank you very much!”

The master was used to it at this point and gratefully accepted the money before cleaning up the table.

“The food was delicious. I’ll be back again.”

Tatsugorou thanked the master one last time and headed for the exit with Pork Loin Cutlet.

“Hmph... So she must be Minced Meat Cutlet II,” Pork Loin Cutlet whispered to himself. He was staring directly at the young female adventurer that Tatsugorou recognized as a new face earlier. She had already finished her meal and was quietly enjoying the otherworldly tea known as coffee.

“What do you mean?” Tatsugorou tilted his head, befuddled.

“Exactly what I said. Isn’t it obvious?” Pork Loin Cutlet laughed to himself and exited the restaurant.

“What’s with him?” Still confused, Tatsugorou stepped outside, finding himself on a moonlit mountain. When one exited the restaurant, they always appeared at the same place from which they entered. The mountain path was dangerous at night, so the swordsman took great care as he headed toward his hermit lodging for the evening.

“Ah... That’s what he meant by II.”

Still a bit tipsy from the seishu, Tatsugorou finally realized what Pork Loin Cutlet meant by his earlier words.

“Now that I think about it, it has been a while since we last saw him... That old rascal, Minced Meat Cutlet.”

The swordsman had heard that the old gentleman had passed away. Out of all the regulars at the restaurant, he loved minced meat cutlet more than any. Tatsugorou recalled the many times he got into fights with Croquette and Pork Loin Cutlet. The latter had called that young woman Minced Meat Cutlet II. While she looked nothing like him, the way she enjoyed her meal made her

more than worthy of that nickname.

I see. Things come full circle.

The young woman was likely a blood relative of the old man. She was significantly younger than he was, so Tatsugorou assumed she was probably his great-granddaughter or something similar.

I should probably think about bringing someone worthwhile there one of these days...

In that moment, Tatsugorou felt that it would be a waste to die and be forgotten.

Chapter 3:

Fried Shrimp **With only the stars and the moon to light his way, Heinrich had already reached the limits of his own stamina. At this rate, he would run out of strength and collapse, dying alone in these wildlands without ever having accomplished the mission given to him. He tried to shake off the visions of the future that his experience in the military had given him, pushing himself to keep running across the field.**

The only thing keeping Heinrich's legs moving was the thought that he couldn't afford to fall here. Indeed, his mission was of the utmost importance, even if it meant pushing his body well past its own limits. He had to let the others know of the huge swarm of mothmen that had appeared in the forest. Until he warned those at the castle, he couldn't afford to die.

Just yesterday, mothmen—humanoid, moth-like monsters with four arms that lived in the Duchy's forest—had taken to the skies in droves. Of course, Heinrich and the other soldiers had been stationed at the fortress nearby specifically to watch for dangerous monsters leaving the forest. They fought resolutely to stop the mothmen from spilling out but eventually found themselves retreating from the creatures' poisonous pollen, sharp claws bearing down on them from the skies, and above all, their overwhelming numbers. The soldiers of the Duchy holed up in the fortress in an attempt to fight back, but the writing was on the wall.

They would soon lose.

They had to inform the castle of the dire situation and request reinforcements as soon as possible. Heinrich was chosen for this important mission because of his excellent riding skills. With a secret message to the state sealed by his commander in his pocket, he flew from the fortress during a moment's opening that his comrades in arms risked their lives to make for him.

Heinrich was supposed to have already arrived at the castle. Instead, he was on foot, running across the wildlands connected to the Duchy. He had made

one critical mistake: his horse. He had picked the strongest, healthiest horse of them all back at the fortress, but just as he was leaving, one of the mothmen managed to hit his steed with its poisonous pollen. On the way to the castle, his horse collapsed, foaming at the mouth. With no other options available to him, Heinrich abandoned his transportation, carried what he could, and ran toward his objective on foot.

However, there were limits to a single man's stamina.

He had lost almost all feeling in his legs, having pushed himself to the very limit, and his body was now dehydrated from sweating too much. Even worse, he was hungry. When Heinrich left the fortress, he had made sure to eat his fill. One entire day had passed since then, however, and his body was running on empty. He made a grave error in choosing not to bring food in order to get his horse to run faster.

I refuse to die here!

Falling here would mean not only the deaths of all the soldiers who believed in Heinrich and were waiting for reinforcements, but also the deaths of every villager in the towns behind the fortress's defense line. It was that incredibly heavy responsibility that kept Heinrich, the young and proud knight of the Seeleman family, running. If he kept up this pace, he could reach the castle by dawn.

The problem was that his body would likely give out on him before then.

Great God of the sea and water, give me strength!

Wanting to preserve as much energy as possible, Heinrich internally prayed to the god most worshipped in the port town he called home.

God had not abandoned him.

"Wha...!"

There was a small cabin in front of Heinrich. In fact, it was so small and dilapidated that it likely belonged to some sort of pioneer.

"I'm saved!"

If he could just get his hands on some water and food... Heinrich made his

decision. The very future of the Duchy was on the line. He would acquire what he needed no matter what the cost.

Without thinking, he reached for his waist and drew the Seeleman family's treasure: a sacred sword forged by a dwarf. It was the one thing he'd known he had to take with him when he left. Heinrich opened the fancy black door, steeling himself for the desperate acts he might have to do in order to complete his mission.

The sound of a bell rang out the moment he opened the door. Heinrich was momentarily blinded by the light from inside, especially after getting so used to the moonlight. This little cabin was much better lit than he expected.

"Welcome!"

Heinrich was greeted by a middle-aged man who was likely the owner of the building.

...He's by himself.

There didn't seem to be anyone else nearby. Grateful for this turn of events, Heinrich gripped the hilt of his sword and barked out his orders.

"I am Heinrich Seeleman, knight of the Duchy! As a citizen of the Duchy living in this cabin, I demand water and food! If you refuse..."

"Comin' right up!"

Heinrich blinked rapidly. He had prepared himself to continue issuing orders but instead found that the man was more than happy to oblige.

"Feel free to sit wherever you'd like. I'll be right back with a warm towel and some water."

Upon looking at the man more carefully, Heinrich thought it strange that he was so well-dressed for someone living in the wildlands.

"V-very well." All the anger was sucked out of him by the man's casual response. Heinrich took a seat at the nearest table.

"Ah, that's right. Sir, can you read the Eastern Continent's language?"

"I-Indeed, I can," Heinrich replied and nodded his head, puzzled by the

question.

“Good, good. Wait just a second.”

The man then headed to the back, where Heinrich assumed the kitchen with the water jug was located.

What is this place? While waiting for the strange man, Heinrich took a look at his surroundings. This only left him further confused. Inside the room were a host of chairs with soft cushions, as well as a bunch of shimmering, beautiful tables. The whole place was oddly bright despite it being the middle of the night. On top of each table were a number of tiny glass and porcelain containers. It was hard to imagine that this was the lodgings of a pioneer: they often lived day-to-day with no guarantee of seeing a crumb of food.

“Hey! Who are you? You don’t seem like a pioneer.” Heinrich turned his attention back to the man as he walked over with a tray, a folded white cloth of some kind, a gold water pitcher, and a glass cup filled with ice and water atop it. Something was all wrong about this place. Without thinking, his tone of voice had become that of an interrogator.

“Pioneer? What are you talking about? This is the restaurant, ‘Western Cuisine Nekoya.’” The man looked at Heinrich, unsure of what he was getting at.

“A restaurant, you say? Out here?!” Heinrich raised his voice without meaning to. This had to be some kind of joke. That he even found this place was pure chance, miraculously encountered during his dash across the wildlands. Why would anybody open a restaurant in a place where they’d ordinarily get no customers?

“I’m not sure what ‘door’ you used to get here, sir, but this one right here is real special.” The master gestured to the door Heinrich had come through. “The doorbell’s got some kinda magic on it that apparently connects it to a host of different doors in your world.”

The man explained to Heinrich the concept of his “Restaurant to Another World” as if he’d done it multiple times before. It was almost as if he didn’t expect him to believe it from the get-go.

“That’s impossible!”

Heinrich’s confusion only grew deeper after hearing the explanation. Seeing this, the mysterious man let out a sigh.

“Yeah, I get it. I wouldn’t believe me either if someone told me something like that. But I can guarantee you that this is a restaurant. I can whip up anything on this menu here, so feel free to make an order.”

With that, the so-called master of the restaurant placed the menu book on the table.

“A menu? What are you talking about?”

Despite his complaints, Heinrich reached over and opened the menu the master left behind. The object’s texture was unlike standard paper or parchment: it was strangely smooth. Listed in the book were an assortment of dishes that he’d never seen or heard of.

“The penmanship is pretty good.”

Heinrich came to the conclusion that whoever authored the menu must have received a fairly good education. Each character was easy to read, and the vocabulary being used was advanced. Perhaps most importantly, each mysterious dish had an easy to understand explanation accompanying it.

“Well, anything will do as long as I can fill my stomach... Wait, what?!” Heinrich’s eyes zoomed in on the description of a particular dish on the menu. Though the item was named “fried shrimp,” the description said this: “breaded and fried shripe caught in the southern regions.”

Upon reading the one sentence explanation, Heinrich forgot his surroundings. Just seeing the word “shripe” for the first time in years was enough to make his mouth water. For you see, shripe was a type of sea creature native to Heinrich’s home by the ocean. The creature was known for the hard shell that hid the soft meat of its long, thin body, as well as its large claws. Shripe were blue upon capture but would turn red after being put to flames. One could drop a dash of salt on a cooked shripe and enjoy it, or they could chop it up and indulge in some soup. The major problem with shripe was that they easily went bad. Even just transporting them to the town next door was difficult, which meant that

coastal towns like Heinrich's were the only places you could eat the delicacy. Heinrich hadn't tasted shripe once in the years since leaving home to become a knight.

I must get a handle on myself.

The moment he thought about the sea creature, he could feel his tongue begin to recall its great flavor. The thick meat's texture completely different from that of any beast, the salty juices that spread throughout one's mouth upon a single bite: it was joyous. Heinrich thought back to his childhood days when he would run down the street like a commoner to buy grilled shripe with the handful of copper coins his nanny had given him.

"Are you ready to order, sir?"

"O-oh, yes. Give me this fried shrimp thing." Heinrich's response to the master was almost automatic. For but a moment, he remembered that this place was in the middle of the wildlands and that there was no guarantee that the food the man cooked would be any good. Still, the master said he could make anything on the menu. If that was a lie, he'd be a fraud.

"Aye, that's one order of fried shrimp coming up! Would you like bread with that?"

"S-sure."

The master confirmed Heinrich's order with him like it was no big deal and returned to the back.

"Is he really going to serve me shripe?" Heinrich wasn't convinced as he took a sip of the water in front of him. He let out a sigh of satisfaction. "It's delicious..."

The cold glass of ice water was by no means sweet, but its fruit-tinged, refreshing coolness washed over Heinrich's dehydrated body.

More importantly, how can there be ice in a place like this?

Heinrich had asked himself this and a whole assortment of questions since arriving at the restaurant, but as of that moment, his hands wouldn't stop moving. He drank from his cup of water, reached over to the gold pitcher, and

poured himself another glass. Heinrich repeated this process three times, the ice cold water quenching his thirst and re-energizing his tired body, eventually filling his stomach. He finally took a moment to catch his breath.

“Hmph, this is quite cozy.”

Next, he went to wipe his sweat with the white cloth the master brought over earlier. The hand towel was folded in a way as he’d never seen before. It was unclear whether it’d been soaked in hot water and then wrung dry, but it felt absolutely wonderful.

Heinrich wiped his hands, his face, and then his neck. By the time all three towels the master left him had turned black from dirt, he was finally clean as a whistle.

“Aye, sorry to keep you waiting. Here’s your order of fried shrimp. I recommend putting some of this special tartar sauce on it as well.”

Just as Heinrich finally readied himself, the master came out with food in hand. On top of the white plate were some thinly sliced vegetables and a small red fruit. Off to the side was a small cup filled with a white sauce-like substance with green flecks.

But above all else were the light brown objects sitting atop the plate, their red tails poking out from beneath the breading. This was supposedly the shripe, or as the master called it, “fried shrimp.”

“Take your time and enjoy! Oh, bread and soup have free refills, so holler if you want some more.”

“Mmhm.”

Heinrich barely heard a word the master said as he swallowed down the saliva flooding his mouth.

This is supposed to be shripe?

It looked nothing like the shripe he was familiar with. First and foremost, its form was too straight. Normally, regardless of how one cooked shripe, the moment it was run over flames, it would curl up. Sure, one could get it to straighten out if they put it on a skewer before cooking it, but this “fried

shrimp” was different.

Here were three pieces of straight fried shrimp, their aroma wafting upward from the plate. Heinrich was no genius in the kitchen, which was why he had so much trouble comprehending what he was seeing.

It said in the explanation that these were coated in breadcrumbs and fried in oil...

Poking out from the bottom was a red tail that left little doubt that this fried shrimp was in fact shripe, even if the rest of the body was light brown.

At first glance, Heinrich had assumed that the coating was made of wheat flour dissolved in water, as was custom in the savage Empire, but the surface was too rough for that. As a knight of an old family, one that represented its town, Heinrich had tasted all kinds of foreign dishes. Yet this was completely new to him.

Whatever. I suppose I'll take a bite.

He used his knife to cut a bit off the top, stabbed his fork into it, and brought it up to his mouth. Apparently, the master had cut the head off of the shripe and peeled away its shell before cooking it. Just under the layer of breading, the white meat of the sea creature peeked out from the cut he made.

Hm. It's quite beautiful.

The contrast of the crisp breading with the fresh-looking white meat on the inside made Heinrich's taste buds tingle as he finally took a bite.

“Oooh.”

The moment he swallowed, Heinrich let out a gasp. This was honest to goodness shripe. The juices that flowed forth from the white meat were fresher than any he had ever tasted in his hometown. That simple flavor combined with the crunchy breading, undoubtedly made from high quality oil and flour, to create pure bliss.

The breading crumbled with each subsequent bite of the shripe, making for a wondrous mouthfeel. There were no signs of the rotting smell that the creature had when it went bad. With each bite, more of the sea creature and its fresh,

delicious juices and crunchy, light coating fell into his once-empty stomach.

Heinrich speedily finished eating the first piece of shripe, utterly entranced.

“Hm... Hm?”

After swallowing the tail in all of its aromatic glory, Heinrich was ready to move on to the second piece. It was then that he recalled the master’s words.

If I remember correctly, he said something about using this tartar sauce...

He looked at the small container holding the white sauce with the green flecks in it. This was assuredly the “tartar” sauce that the master referred to. The problem was whether or not applying this to the fried shrimp would actually be any good.

Still somewhat reluctant about the whole thing, Heinrich cut off the tip of the fried shrimp and dipped it into the white sauce. The green specks stood out in contrast.

It looks beautiful, but how does it taste?

Heinrich slowly brought the piece of shripe to his mouth and was immediately stunned.

What the... What is this?!

He had never tasted something like this before. The mysterious white sauce had a mellow flavor to it with just a hint of sourness. It was made of what Heinrich suspected were pickled vegetables and boiled eggs, along with just a dash of strong herbs.

The tartar sauce helped to bring out the flavor of the coated shripe, while the eggs and faint aroma of the herbs further transformed the taste into something even more complex.

This is unbelievable!

Heinrich felt a wave of regret wash over him. The fried shrimp he ate first was delicious, but it could not compare to the tartar sauce-infused delicacy he just devoured.

Just as he was coming to grips with this, his stomach growled loudly. How

terrifying it all was. Despite having just put food into his stomach, it felt as though he had emptied it instead.

“Excuse me! Another plate!” Heinrich placed another order.

“Aye! Sounds like you really liked the fried shrimp.”

The master wore a smile on his face as he replied, almost as if his long years of experience had told him that one plate would not suffice. He immediately brought out a second helping of fried shrimp for Heinrich. In the end, Heinrich would devour a total of three plates of the delicious seafood, covered in tartar sauce. The killer combo of the fried shrimp and sour sauce, along with the excellent side dishes of white bread and soup mixed with oranie, other veggies, and meat began to fill his stomach. As a palate cleanser, Heinrich would occasionally take a bite of the fresh, leaf-like vegetables on the plate. Each bite of the thinly sliced greens came with a satisfying crunch. This strange vegetable tasted nothing like any plants found in the wilderness: it had a light sweetness to it and went surprisingly well with tartar sauce. In fact, Heinrich found that he could probably eat the combination forever.

Bread, soup, the vegetables, and the fried shrimp drenched in tartar sauce: there wasn't a single loser amongst them. Heinrich had even forgotten that the Duchy was in danger during his time indulging in this feast.

“Oh God who rules the sea and water, I thank you for providing me with this incredible meal.” Heinrich ended his meal with a prayer to the powers that be. He stood from his seat hoping to ask the master for his recipe but soon looked as though he'd seen a ghost.

Blast it! I have no money!

Indeed, he had left his wallet at the fortress upon leaving for the castle.

This is bad.

Heinrich had just indulged in the most amazing of meals. It was worth at least one hundred silver coins, if not more. Heinrich would be willing to even offer up a gold coin should the master request as much. If he had had his wallet on him, he would have happily paid any fee asked of him. But unfortunately, his wallet was far, far away.

I can't not pay him... Ah, I know!

He had totally forgotten about his original plan of requesting food and drink by force.

"Master! I'd like to settle my bill, but I need to ask a favor of you." Heinrich called out to the middle-aged man.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry to say I have no money! I want you to take this instead! When next I come, I promise that I will pay you in full! Please take this collateral until then!" Heinrich offered the master his family's treasure, the sword made by a dwarf.

"Wha?! N-no, I can just put it on your tab."

"That will not do! This is my way of showing my sincerity. Fear not! I swear I will come to this place again! I have urgent business and must leave now, but please feed me fried shrimp again when I return."

Heinrich rushed to the door, leaving the master utterly befuddled by what just transpired.

"W-wait! Sir, the door only appears once every seven..."

"My apologies! I must hurry! The fate of the Duchy depends on it!" He dashed through the door, the master's words bouncing off of his back as he left.

Heinrich's feet felt light as a feather. The rest and the delicious fried shrimp had given him the energy he needed. He was no longer tired.

And so the knight arrived at the castle before dawn, alerting them to the approaching danger. Now aware of just how dire the situation was, the Duchy dispatched a host of soldiers to the fortress, and the day was saved. Heinrich, who had worked the hardest of all, was honored and rewarded.

Yet despite all of his gains, Heinrich was left stunned.

"This can't be! It's not here?!"

10 days after the mothmen were repelled, Heinrich once again visited the old cabin on the wildlands. What he found left him wide-eyed. The restaurant that

he dined at that day was no longer there. The cabin was present, but there were no traces of any restaurant or even humans. In fact, it looked as though it had been abandoned years ago. The black door he saw on that day was also missing.

“Then what was it I saw that day?”

Heinrich was filled with questions. He knew for sure that it wasn't a dream. The dwarf sword he'd given the master, worth hundreds of gold coins on the market, was gone.

That was three years ago.

An impossibly long three years had passed since that miraculous day.

“Captain Heinrich, you have a visitor.”

Recognized for having saved the Duchy from certain doom, Heinrich was been entrusted an entire squad of knights. It was one of these men that alerted him to a visitor.

“Oh? Who is it?” Heinrich tilted his head in response, having long since grown into his position as captain with dignity and awareness. This fortress was fairly distant from the hustle and bustle of the city. He couldn't think of anyone who would come out here uninvited.

“Yes, well, they're alone. They requested a meeting with you by name. They called themselves Tatsugorou,” Heinrich's underling informed him.

“What?! Did you say Tatsugorou?! The real one?!” Heinrich raised his voice in shock. Tatsugorou was known on the Eastern Continent as a famous swordsman who had crossed over from the Western Continent. There was not a single swordsman or mercenary who did not know his name.

“Yes. Unfortunately, I was unable to confirm his identity, but he does look exactly as the old bardic songs described...” The soldier, still a bit unsure, began to describe the man to his captain.

The person in question was a large, older gentleman wearing a kimono made of magic silver, woven by elves. Everything about the description seemed

accurate, but the biggest piece of evidence was that he came out to this fortress by himself. Normally, anyone looking to make the trip would have to be accompanied by bodyguards of some kind to defend against the host of monsters populating the area. He was clearly no ordinary man.

“Understood. Bring him in, but take care not to be rude.”

Upon hearing the description, Heinrich decided to meet the man. He gave his orders to the soldier, and the two men finally met.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Seeleman. My name is Tatsugorou.”

The man calling himself Tatsugorou respectfully lowered his head to Heinrich. He wore foreign garb and held a samurai sword, with a second blade tucked away at his waist. Heinrich found himself dumbstruck by the powerful aura the man exuded. He was almost like a lion marking his territory. There was no doubt about it: this was the real Tatsugorou.

“No, no, the pleasure is all mine, Sir Tatsugorou! I am Heinrich Seeleman, a knight of the Duchy. I’ve heard much word of your exploits!” he greeted Tatsugorou, making sure to offer him the utmost respect as a warrior. The foreign swordsman before him was known far and wide as an adventurer who could cut down any monster in exchange for money. He had even taken down beasts said to have been undefeatable by human hands. To Heinrich, who had spent years training as a knight, Tatsugorou was the swordsman he aspired to be. Even as a child, he heard the many tales the bards would tell of the samurai.

Heinrich finally regained his senses. He was incredibly honored that the legendary swordsman came to see him, but he didn’t understand why. He cleared his throat before asking Tatsugorou, “But what brings you to our little fortress in the middle of nowhere?”

Tatsugorou nodded in response. “Actually, an acquaintance of mine asked me to deliver something you forgot.”

He reached for his waist, drawing out one of the swords and handing it to Heinrich. It wasn’t the type of one-handed samurai sword that he used in battle but one much more ornamental in nature.

“That’s...?!” Heinrich’s eyes widened as he looked down at the blade. “How...

where did you get this?”

This was the very same dwarf-forged sword that Heinrich had left behind at the restaurant years ago. It was the sword that he had carried with pride for many years, he was sure of it.

Why did Tatsugorou have the sword that went missing three years ago?

“Like I said, an acquaintance of mine asked me to return it to you. Since it didn’t seem like you’d ever come back, he felt you might be wanting without it.” Tatsugorou grinned. Heinrich was just as the master had described him: the stubborn type of youngster who didn’t listen.

“An acquaintance, you say? Wait, could it be...?” It took but a moment for Heinrich to realize the meaning of Tatsugorou’s words.

“It is likely exactly what you think. If I remember correctly, there should be a ‘door’ somewhere near this fortress.” After responding to Heinrich, Tatsugorou recalled some info he stumbled across during his many years of travel and smirked. “What do you say? Care to join me for some fried shrimp tomorrow, on the Day of Satur?”

Fried shrimp. Heinrich raised his voice after being rendered momentarily speechless by his words.

“I can eat fried shrimp again?” The memories of his meal from three years ago all came flooding back, and he gulped.

“Of course. Once every seven days, on the Day of Satur,” Tatsugorou replied and smiled.

On that day, the Restaurant to Another World gained a brand new regular.

Chapter 4:

Tofu Steak

Fardania's eyes filled with both satisfaction and rage as she looked down in front of her. On the table was a black metal plate that once held the meal the young elf girl had finished off only moments ago.

She'd been had.

The taste of defeat lingered in her mouth. Indeed, Fardania, an elf of the Shiena woods, was forced to admit she had lost.



“Well? Delicious, right?” She could hear the annoying human man speaking to her.

Fardania honestly hadn’t anticipated this. She never thought that humans, with their short lifespans and limited magical power, could ever create a meal that could satisfy her stomach. The noble race of elves once ruled over the world itself. With their powerful magic and rich culture, it was said that even dragons stood no chance against them.

Elves usually did not eat food made from animals. As guardians of the woods that could communicate with beasts, elves looked upon their animal neighbors as friends. Even the smell of cooking animal meat was too strong for them. To elves, animal meat was wholly unappetizing. That was why they didn’t hunt them. Their magic and archery skills were reserved for defending the woods against trespassers.

Perhaps as a sacrifice in exchange for their long lifespans, elves reproduced at an extremely low rate. Since their numbers were so few, the forests that elves tended to live in were typically lush with trees and flowers of all kinds. Capable of using their magic to preserve their food through the colder seasons, the elves could make do. Unlike the barbaric humans whose lives lasted but a moment in time, or those of mixed blood (half-elves) who could eat meat or fish, “true” elves like Fardania did not eat animals.

That was why Fardania had made her order in the most sneering of ways. Yet the man still managed to answer her request: a delicious meal that used no meat, fish, milk, or eggs.

Fardania wouldn’t have been surprised if he had brought out a salad of fresh vegetables or some kind of mushroom soup. She often ate dishes like that. If that had been the case, she could have just said “Not bad for a human” and left it at that. Unfortunately, this was something else entirely. What the human man brought to her was a delicious meal that she had neither seen nor heard of before.

Curses!

She was well aware that after eating everything on her plate, she couldn’t very well tell him it wasn’t delicious. She’d look like a fool. Biting her lip all the

while, she thought back on how things had come to this.

My first mistake was coming here at all.

She recalled the moment she stepped into this Restaurant to Another World only minutes ago.

It began when Fardania, on her way to search for some mushrooms, had felt the strange flow of energies in the forest.

“What was that? Some kind of teleportation magic?”

Her ears twitched in response to the sudden shift in the flow of magical energy. There was a specific corner of the forest that made it easy for magical energies to gather, and it was there that a great deal of it had collected, as though some sort of spell had been activated. This had to be the work of a magical teleportation circle.

Fardania’s vast knowledge of magic led her to this conclusion. There was no way she was wrong, as her father had taught her everything she knew. When he was younger, he traveled the human world with another elf from their forest capital, learning the ways of the magical arts. Elves were a race incredibly proficient in the magic arts. Even humans who were said to be masters of magic were only really equal to that of a young, perhaps fifty-year-old elf child. Compared to elves, who would go on to spend the nearly one thousand years of their lives researching magic, humans and dwarves simply stood no chance.

Which is why elves were particularly sensitive to magical energy and could often pick up on strong spells before they were activated.

“This isn’t magic from anyone in the village. I have to go check this out.”

If somebody was using strange magic in the elf forest of Shiena, there was no way Fardania could ignore it. She held up her trusty bow and approached the area where she sensed the disturbance.

There it is...

Upon arriving at the area, Fardania found a strange black door attached to one of the trees. On it was a bizarre picture of a cat and words in a language that Fardania did not recognize. It went without saying that there were no elves

mad enough to put a door here. Going by that simple truth and the quality of magic she could sense from the door, Fardania came to the logical conclusion.

Looks like it's a magical relic left behind by the ancient elves.

This was a type of magical tool built over a thousand years ago, well before Fardania was born into this world. These tools were the origins of the complex, modern day magic of this age. This item was clearly the source of the magical energy she felt earlier.

With magic this strong, there's no doubt that it's a door to another world.

Despite her youth, Fardania was one of the most talented magic users in the forest. Her wealth of knowledge led her to accurately identify the door's true identity. It was the sort of magic that activated in the interval of a few days, when its energies were at their peak. Given the strength of this magical energy, she theorized that multiple doors appeared simultaneously around the world.

"Well, I guess I'll take a look."

Fardania placed a teleportation symbol on a nearby tree. With this, she'd be able to teleport back here by force from another world, as long as the door was still connected. Her preparations made, she stepped through.

Ring, ring.

The source of magical energy let out a ringing sound. And then...

"One order of fried seafood, please! And some whiskey, too! Lots of it!"

"The usual."

"Omelet rice. Large. To go. Three orders."

"Master, can I get two orders of fried shrimp over here?"

"Um, can I get a chocolate parfait?"

The sight of a small restaurant filled with tables and chairs stretched out before Fardania's eyes. Seated in many of those chairs were customers ordering a host of different dishes.

"Aye, welcome! Take a seat anywhere that's open!"

Fardania was somewhat dumbstruck at the sight in front of her. The man,

likely the master of this place, was carrying plates of food as he noticed and called out to her. Watching all of this with a look of disdain in her eyes, Fardania decided to take a seat out of sheer curiosity.

“Damn it all! My stuff still doesn’t even come close!” The dwarf man tore into his fish and booze while letting out a heavy sigh, then immediately placed another order. He looked like he reeked of ironware, his large axe propped up next to him.

“Indeed, this is the dish to have on the Day of Satur!” An old, thin man nodded to himself and dug into his fried pork, occasionally taking sips of the golden alcohol next to him.

“Mm. Seconds.” The source of this magically translated voice was that of a Lizardman warrior covered in scars. Fardania had heard that these monsters lived in the wetlands. The one in front of her ordered a yellow egg dish with some sort of red stuff on top of it.

“Tartar sauce is great, but pork cutlet sauce goes well with it, too! Shripe truly is magnificent!”

The next voice came from a human man, likely a warrior, as he gushed over the sea creature he was eating.

Elsewhere, there was a noble-looking human woman in a beautiful dress, eating some kind of food made from dairy with black stuff on it.

This seems to be a restaurant where they serve human food.

Fardania found herself troubled. Nothing here looked particularly appetizing. The menu she was given upon arrival featured a host of foods she’d never heard of or seen before, but one look at what the other customers were eating told her everything she needed to know. Nothing here would please an elf.

Why must all human food be so barbaric?

Fardania recognized that all the meals served here had some manner of beast, fish, milk, or eggs in it. As a true elf who lived in the woods, none of that was considered edible.

The bread and soup are off limits, too.

Elves had sharp senses. If even a little bit of beast, fish, milk, or egg were used to cook something, they'd be able to detect it and would immediately lose their appetite.

What should I do? I can't very well not order anything after coming in.

As one of the younger elves in the forest, Fardania was often still treated like a child. Even so, her knowledge of human customs told her that it would be rude to enter a restaurant and then not eat anything.

"Are you ready to order, miss?"

The master walked up to her, having noticed her struggling with the menu. After letting out a brief sigh, Fardania decided to mess with him a bit.

"Let's see... I'd like something with no meat, fish, milk, or eggs in it. That is, if you're even capable of making a dish like that. If not, I won't be needing anything. I'll just be on my way. Sorry."

It was unlikely the human would be able to satisfy her needs, and so Fardania was already about to stand up.

However.

"Aye, you got it! Now then, something without meat or fish, which'd mean... Do you mind leaving it to the chef's choice?"

The master's response was so confident that Fardania did a double take.

"Excuse me!" Panicked, she stood up and raised her voice.

"Yes?"

"Just so you know, if there's even a hint of meat mixed into my food, I can't eat it. Do you still think you can cook for me?"

"It's no problem, miss. Hm, but the miso soup is going to be off the menu. I use bonito stock for it. Other than that, I can serve you a full meal."

"Fine, then." After hearing his words, Fardania had no choice but to back down. She quietly sat in her seat.

What is he planning on serving me? I can't imagine this being an easy task for a human. Some kind of combination of fresh vegetables and soup? But he said

he couldn't serve me soup...

Fardania was prepared to complain to her heart's content if this was some kind of trick.

After a brief period of waiting, the master set a plate down right in front of her.

"Here's your food, miss."

"What is this?" Fardania couldn't help but look at the master's face after glancing down at the plate.

On the black dish was some kind of food that had been grilled with cobbler's tuber oil and sprinkled with salt. Next to it were fresh-looking orange karoots, boiled to sweetness. To the side of that were moist greens. Up to this point, Fardania remained unsurprised. She had seen all of this before. The problem was the main course: the bizarre white square sitting in the center of the dish.

Fardania had never seen anything like the sizzling hot food in front of her.

"It's tofu steak flavored with ponzu sauce. I only used seaweed stock to make it, so I think you should be able to eat it, miss. Actually, a lot of young women like yourself tend to order this menu item. Oh, and since bread doesn't fit your needs, I brought you a side of rice. I can guarantee you it'll go well with the steak. Please enjoy!"

The master replied to her as if directly answering the question in her mind and then went to take another customer's order.

...It certainly doesn't smell like meat.

Fardania leaned in close to the dish and took a whiff. While she didn't detect the scent of any *meat*, what she did smell was the ever-so-slightly fruity, mysterious sauce sizzling on the black plate. She also picked up on the aromatic white cube in the center, which was clearly fried using fresh vegetable oil. There wasn't a hint of the beastly smell that elves so very hated. The master had fulfilled his end of the bargain.

But the problem is how it tastes.

The young elf woman was rather confident in her cooking skills. Since her

mother passed away due to illness, Fardania had spent thirty some odd years doing all kinds of housework, and became known in the Shiena woods for being a skilled chef of sorts. She viewed the meal before her as a challenge. Sure, the master had met her bare minimum requirements, but if it tasted awful, none of that mattered.

“Here I go...”

Nervous, or perhaps tantalized by the aroma coming from the dish in front of her, Fardania gulped and picked up her fork and knife. She was curious about the side dishes but decided to tackle the main course first. She brought her knife to the odd white object.

The utensil cut through it with amazing ease and smoothness, as though it were made of air itself.

I don't get it. The master called it "tofu," but...

Fardania cut out a square piece of tofu, enough for one bite, and stabbed her fork into it. She took a more careful look at the odd food. If nothing else, the scent coming from the lightly browned mystery object wasn't awful. It seemed edible.

She was a bit hesitant about the grated vegetables and brown sauce on top, especially as she'd never seen anything like them before. Nonetheless, she chose to carry on.

Here goes nothing.

Regardless of its flavor, the fact remained that the master had held up his end of the bargain. It would be tremendously rude for her to not at least give it a try. Fardania hardened her resolve and took a bite.

Wh-what is this?!

A wave of shock erupted from deep within her heart. The aromatic flavor of the tofu's crisp surface, and the gentle, warm flavor of its center combined to melt and spread throughout Fardania's mouth. A brand new world of flavor took hold of her.

This was tofu.

I feel like I ate this when I was little, but I can't place it. There's something nostalgic about it...

What is this?

The flavor was strange, much like the texture of the tofu itself. Though Fardania was unaware of it, this flavor was very similar to that of a dairy product produced from animal milk.

Elves didn't consider dairy edible. Even if they tried to have some, they'd first be assaulted by its rawness, preventing them from being able to enjoy the flavor. This meant that elves of the forest were only familiar with a single dairy product throughout their entire time on the planet.

I know... This is Mom's flavor.

Fardania gazed far, far back into her memories and came to a realization. Due to their long life spans, elves spent comparatively little time as babies. However, much like humans, they too were nursed by their mothers.

This is incredible!

Finally shaking herself free of the impact of the first bite, Fardania rolled the dissolving tofu around in her mouth, trying to dissect its flavors. What she found left her stunned. While the white cube called tofu was delicious in its own right, it was the sauce on top of it that brought out its flavors and full potential.

I believe he called it ponzu sauce. It's just a bit sour and salty... What is it made of?

While slowly investigating every inch of the tofu steak in her mouth, Fardania took a moment to think about the ponzu sauce. It contained the juice of an unsweetened, strongly citric fruit and some sort of brown liquid. It was a salty juice that tasted like the tofu. By itself, it was already delicious.

However, there was a third, unknown flavor that brought the saltiness and sourness together. It had the scent of the sea, a place she had not laid her eyes upon in some fifty years. This third element elevated the other two flavors to even greater heights.

How could a human have made this?

Fardania was not sure what exactly this scent of the sea was. However, she did have an idea of how it worked. A long time ago, her mother had traveled the human world and learned about sun-dried mushrooms. She didn't know why it worked like this, but by drying mushrooms in the sun and using them in soup instead of regular ones, they produced a much better flavor.

This was probably something similar. Drying this unknown ingredient increased its flavor, and simmering it gave the broth a savory quality. Adding this special something to the other two juices gave this dish a single, complete flavor. This was far more advanced than anything Fardania had ever made.

Just that by itself was delicious, and yet...

There were also the fragrant herbs and snowy-white grated vegetables. Matching these with the sour, salty sauce created a complex deliciousness combining multiple flavors and scents. On top of that, thanks to the strong, unique aroma of the herbs, their scent lingered in the diner's nose even after swallowing down a bite of the tofu.

The complex sauce combined with the tofu and its simple, bland flavor to give the dish a light yet satisfying feeling that filled the stomach.

I can't believe a human made this!

Fardania was shaken to her very core. The human race had a short lifespan. They would go on to die just as soon as they had come into this world. Compared to elves, humans had no worthwhile culture to speak of.

Or at least, that was what she had thought. Fardania was an intelligent young woman, and as such was more than willing to recognize the error of her ways. This dish was far beyond anything the elves were capable of making. She swallowed her frustration along with the food.

The rice served with the main course had a faint sweetness all its own, which meshed well with the relatively heavy flavor of the tofu steak. The other side dishes, lightly browned cobbler's tubers and sweet boiled karoots, were delicious. Even the salted greens were positively delectable, leaving Fardania even more frustrated.

I refuse to lose like this!

A fire was lit in the heart of the young elf girl who coveted the culinary arts. She had experienced a shock unlike any other. This was the moment in which the proud Fardania found her path in life.

The next day...

“Are you really going, Fardania?”

To the average human, her father looked no younger than the girl herself despite approaching three hundred years old. He wore a concerned expression on his face.

Some 150 years ago, he had ventured out of the woods into the human world, driven by a sense of curiosity. That was why he knew better than anyone that it was full of dangers, monsters, and demons. If he had not met his older friend, skilled in the magic arts, and his talented archer wife, he would have died. He had faced down death multiple times, in fact.

As far as he was aware, the demon race lost the war against the humans, so they weren't quite as powerful as they once were. That said, only seventy years had passed since the humans defeated the dark lord. Things couldn't possibly change that much in a hundred years. He didn't think the world was remotely close to being peaceful enough for him to let his young daughter venture out on her own.

Fardania was his precious, precious daughter. She was still a child! The thought of letting her leave the protection of the forest left him deeply concerned.

“Of course! Don't worry, Dad. I'm an adult.” Fardania's resolve wasn't weak enough for her worrywart of a father to convince her to stay home.

After taking a blow to her elven pride, she couldn't afford to just rest on her laurels in the forest. She needed to embark on a journey so that she could one day make a dish better than the one served to her by the man at the Restaurant to Another World. Her youth, and a dash of recklessness, led her to stubbornly stand by this.

“No, you’re not! You’re still way too young, Fardania!”

Her father raised his voice in protest. He lost his wife to illness only thirty years prior. Sure, Fardania had physically matured, but there was still much for her to learn. Her archery and magic skills still weren’t up to par. As far as he was concerned, she was a child that still needed protecting for at least another hundred years.

“Geez, I’m telling you, I’ll be fine! Don’t worry! When I come back, I’m gonna feed you something amazing!” Reaching the limits of her patience, Fardania quickly left the house.

“Ah, wait! At least take this letter...!”

Paying no mind to her father’s words, Fardania cast strengthening magic on her body and began to move like the wind itself. In mere moments, she cleared the Shiena woods and found herself in front of a vast, sprawling field.

“That’s right! I’m going to make something delicious! I’ll show that human what’s what!”

So began Fardania’s journey to reclaim her pride and to create a delectable new dish.

Some years later, an elven dish with beans as its core ingredient would be born into the world. Despite being free of meat, fish, eggs, or milk, the meal was beloved by races all across the land.

Fardania, who would go on to be the creator of this dish and a legendary chef all her own, set off on her journey at the young age of 130.

Chapter 5:

Beef Stew

Saturdays at the Restaurant to Another World started with kitchen prep, just like any other day there.

It was six in the morning. After rising from his bed in Nekoya, also his home, the master cleaned himself up as per the usual and headed down from the third floor of the building to the elevator used for transporting ingredients. From there, he made his way to the first floor where the restaurant was located.

On Saturday mornings, the first thing he prepped was the beef stew. He would grab the largest pot in the restaurant and fill it to the brim. After stir-frying the vegetables and beef in his trusty wok, he then moved them into his stockpot and boiled it, removing the fat on top when it was done. For his next step, he'd pour in the custom demi-glace sauce that he kept refrigerated and boil it all together. The master was always careful to take his time with this.

Besides the options designed for sharing amongst multiple people, the beef stew was the most expensive dish on the Nekoya menu. That said, a single serving was still only one thousand yen, as per the rules of the restaurant. The former master believed that it was impossible to make proper Nekoya-style beef stew without making a ton of it, which was how cooking enough for one hundred servings became a kind of tradition.

Despite all of his prep work, there weren't actually that many customers who ordered beef stew. Unlike the war zones that were the weekdays, Saturdays at Nekoya was relatively peaceful, meaning that the master could manage things on his own. Of the many menu items at the restaurant, there just weren't that many people who wanted to pay a silver coin for what was described as "a boiled beef soup."

The customers that did happen to order it were no less surprised by its taste, but even then, there were few who would pay a silver coin (at Nekoya, one copper coin was equivalent to about hundred yen, a silver coin 1,000 yen, and a gold coin 10,000 yen) for the meal.

Yet somehow, in the last twenty years, there had never been a single time that there was leftover beef stew. As for why that was...

The Red Queen's nose twitched, signaling that the time had come.

Is it time?

The Red Queen was capable of picking up on even the slightest of magical currents, which made this no different. The scent was coming from below the Red Queen's stomach, radiating from a golden mountain that would make any human lose their mind with greed. It was a huge pile of gold and treasures that she spent thousands of years gathering for herself.

The Red Queen spread her wings and let out a roar to signify her excitement. The mountain below her quaked, petrifying all those who lived there. Her massive claws, stronger than any sword in the entire world, were capable of splitting a crag in two with a single strike. She used them to rake her mountain of treasures apart. After doing this multiple times to all of the precious treasures she'd collected over the years, she revealed her most prized possession hidden beneath it all.

There it is.

The object that the Red Queen was searching for finally showed itself to her: a black door with a picture of a cat on it, bathed in magical energies. The faint aroma leaking from the other world on the opposite side of the door left the Red Queen intoxicated for a moment.

"You called, my queen."

While she indulged in this sensation, the red balrog butler who had long served as her right-hand man responded to her earlier roar, bowing his head deeply. Despite his looks, his unflinching loyalty to the Red Queen always elicited a satisfied nod from her.

"I'm going out. So..."

The Red Queen's body began to rumble as she used her incredibly rare, profound energies to cast a magic spell.

The spell in question? Transformation. Immense billows of flame engulfed the

Red Queen, making her giant body seem to melt away like ice. The flames shrank smaller and smaller, eventually leaving behind but a shadow before vanishing. That shadow belonged to an unbelievably beautiful woman.

Her red hair shone like fire, and her perfect skin glistened bronze. As for her age, she appeared to be in the prime of her life. Her fiery eyes, vertical golden pupils, and the crimson horns just above her ears revealed her true identity. The woman stood there, proudly exposing her perfect, nude body, and issued a command to her underling.

“Prepare me a dress. The usual one. Understood?”

“Yes, my queen. As you wish.”

The Red Queen rested against her golden treasures as she watched the balrog bow his head and leave to fetch her clothes.

“Goodness, this is rather shameful. I’m over 100,000 years old, and yet I can’t bear to wait for even a few moments.”

The Red Queen’s eyes were locked upon the black door to another world. Long ago, she formed a contract with the human on the other side. She promised only to visit his Restaurant to Another World as the last customer of the day. Many years ago, she’d visited the other side and ended up shooting a terrifying glare at one who dared to partake of her treasure.

“You’ll cause trouble for the other customers, so could you please stop?” the human master warned her.

The Queen was a proud beast who cared little for promises made to humans, but she understood where he was coming from. Indeed, to dine alongside her, one of the six great dragons, would be unpleasant for creatures that couldn’t even stand against the simple-minded lizard beasts that lived on her mountain. Not to mention that should she not abide by their shared promise, the master would not serve her the thing she wanted. If holding up her end of the bargain meant she had something to gain from it, she would continue to do so.

With their agreement in mind, the Red Queen waited until nightfall, that certain aroma leaking through to her side of the door.

“It is time, my queen,” the balrog intoned.

The Red Queen rose to her feet upon hearing her butler's voice. "Indeed."

"Please enjoy your meal."

"I will."

The balrog dressed his master with a level of care that should have been impossible for a beast as huge and imposing as him. She wore no jewelry or makeup, for she herself was the most beautiful thing in this world. There was no need for anything else.

"I'll be on my way."

"Please take care, my queen."

With her preparations complete, the Red Queen grabbed the object her balrog butler brought to her. It was a huge silver pot shaped like a tube, polished to perfection by her underlings. The object in question was so large that a human would struggle to carry it with two hands, never mind one. However, the Red Queen carried it as if it were light as a feather. She opened the black door and stepped into the restaurant.

"I'm here, Master," she said, announcing her presence.

"Welcome! What can I get for you today?"

The master, used to their back and forth, asked her the same thing he did every time.

"Is it not obvious? I only request one thing." The Red Queen placed down her pot and announced her order. "Beef stew. I'll start with one bowl."

That was the name of the delectable dish that befitted a queen such as her. It was the same dish she had come to order over the last twenty-four years since the mysterious black door first appeared in her castle.

It had been seven days since the Red Queen had come face to face with this most immaculate of dishes. Wafting before her was the complex aroma of various vegetables, meat, and spices. She made sure to enjoy this delightful scent first. She was intoxicated by its smell; simply frying or boiling meat and vegetables could not produce such a scent as entrancing as this.

"This is it. This is the aroma that tempts me to no end."

The beef and vegetables had been boiled to perfection in the soup's thick, rich broth. It held flavors from another world that could not be found in her own. The Queen's prior favorite, a roast beef she would make for herself, barely counted as food in comparison.

"I shall partake, then."

The Red Queen took a deep breath, gulped, and dipped her spoon into the soup. Just enough for one mouthful. The rich, condensed flavor of the meat and vegetable soup spread throughout her palate. The beef was boiled after being lightly roasted, then combined with the sweetness of the unknown boiled vegetables, and then further seasoned with a variety of spices and herbs. After that, it was simmered again, this time with some sort of alcohol. Yes, this was exactly the same delicious dish she'd enjoyed seven days prior.

"Positively delicious!"

The beef stew struck right to the Red Queen's stomach, making the words spill from her lips. She repeatedly brought her silver spoon back and forth between the bowl in front of her and her mouth, unable to control herself. After enjoying the soup to her heart's content, she turned her attention to the orange vegetables, slow-boiled until they were tender. In the same spoonful, she took up some of the light yellow vegetables that were later added to the soup to hold it all together. The Red Queen brought the spoon to her mouth.

"Mm. As always, the broth and vegetables are quite good."

The combination of the soft, almost melting orange vegetables and the crisper light yellow mixed well with the flavor of the soup, leaving a pleasant warmth in her mouth. Normally, the Red Queen despised vegetables; she considered them "feed for the long ears." However, when combined with a rich soup such as this, she adored them.

She continued to eat spoonful after spoonful of vegetables, chasing them with sips of the soup. She made sure not to touch the one part of the dish that she adored the most. The Queen was the type of woman who liked to leave the best for last.

"Now then..."

After enjoying the flavor of the vegetables and finishing just about half of the beef stew, the Red Queen decided it was time to head for the main course. It was the ingredient that made the beef stew what it was: in other words, the beef. She grabbed a spoonful of the meat, precut in such a way as to fit in a human's mouth. The Queen gulped at the sight of the beef; it was so fork-tender that it looked like it might fall apart at any moment. She took a bite.

There were no words. The beef melted away in her mouth. There was no time for her to voice her approval. She wanted to use every precious moment she had to enjoy the food.

Ah.

The meat eventually vanished down the Queen's throat, and she sighed deeply. No matter how many hundreds, no, thousands of times she repeated this moment, she would never grow tired of it. She hurried to the next spoonful.

The savoriness of both the vegetables and the meat melded together in the soup, making for a complex flavor profile. While the vegetables had grown more soft and flavorful, the beef had been boiled perfectly. Each spoonful of this magnificent creation came with a different experience, urging her to take yet another bite. To the Red Queen, it was as if the beef stew held some kind of magic in and of itself.

As always, the Queen took her time with the dish, thoroughly enjoying it until finally finishing off the remaining meat. She stood up from her table.

"Master, the usual. I trust you understand, yes?"

As per agreement with the previous master, she handed the man two gold coins. She felt this was too little for such a dish, but since this was the agreed-upon sum, she did not argue. A long time ago, she attempted to give the old master a pot full of gold in exchange for the beef stew. He immediately turned her down. "We don't overcharge, and we don't do discounts. That's just how it is!" The older man told her that one gold coin would suffice, but the Red Queen managed to convince him to accept two. That agreement remained unchanged, even with the current master.

"Yup, you betcha. Go right ahead and take it with you."

The master took the heavy gold coins from her, each imprinted with the face of an elfin individual and stuffed them into his pocket.

“That I shall.”

With the master’s permission, the Red Queen made her way into the sparkingly clean kitchen. It was there that she found what she was searching for.

There it is.

Unable to contain her excitement, the Queen let out a sigh of flames. Inside the kitchen was a small (though large for a human) pot filled with beef stew. Its fragrant aroma filled the tiny room.

“I’ll be taking this, Master.”

The Red Queen placed the lid on the pot to prevent the precious beef stew from spilling out and lifted it as though it were light as a feather. She could feel the warmth of the pot through her hands. This filled her with a quiet joy as she cheerfully rushed to the exit.

“Farewell, Master. I’ll be back.”

“Much obliged. We’ll be waiting for you!”

The master politely opened the door for her, and she left the restaurant. She stepped down on the mountain of gold just beyond, making sure not to spill the contents of her pot. As soon as the door behind her closed, it vanished, leaving the mountain in its natural state.

“Welcome back, my queen.”

“Mm. Clean this.”

The Red Queen immediately took her dress off and tossed it at the balrog. She undid her magic, placed the pot of beef stew down on a flat surface, returned to her true form, and buried the spot where the door was under gold once more.

Now, it’s time to enjoy this.

The Queen then carefully grabbed the pot with her claws, capable of emitting

heat that could melt any steel, and lightly heated its insides until it was perfect. She brought her mouth—filled with sharp teeth—close to the pot, stretching her tongue out to taste the beef stew.

The soup was delicious when she ate it in human form, but it was even more delightful when she could eat it little by little in her true form.



If only the master could make more...

The Red Queen continued to savor the beef stew in front of her. She would enjoy it until the stew eventually ran out a day later.

A terrifying, legendary creature said to have defeated the armies of the elves and their golems and chimeras by herself—she was also one of the Restaurant to Another World's biggest eaters. The Red Queen's meal had only just begun.

Chapter 6:

Spaghetti with Meat Sauce Thomas Alfade, the former proprietor of the Alfade Company, was said to have been that company's savior.

The Alfade Company was one of many old companies in the most prosperous of all cities on the Eastern Continent, the capital of the Kingdom. Its lineage had its roots in the very first Kingdom that was wiped out so many moons ago.

The Alfade Company primarily did business in all sorts of wheat products, specifically noodles. While wheat noodles were easy to store for extended periods of time as long as one kept them dehydrated, they barely had any flavor to them unless they were boiled in a large amount of water. This had made them unpopular with the masses. Thomas was responsible for elevating said wheat noodles, once thought to be nothing but peasant food, to a genuine staple of any noble's dining table. He built the Alfade Company into the Kingdom's most prominent trading empire.

The secret to Thomas's success was the number of different sauces he invented. There was the typical sauce made of wheat and milk, adored by many. But then there was also the one made from fermented fish sauce, largely found in nations by the sea on the Western Continent, and mushrooms, stir-fried together. There was also the bold sauce popular in the trading ports of the west that used salted fish eggs, as well as the new spicy sauce made of chili pepel powder.

Alfade's sauces changed the way people ate noodles. No longer did they settle for simple toppings like salt, cheese, honey, or herbs. They now desired Thomas's sauces and the noodles that came with them. This was how the relatively small Alfade Company eventually became a massive presence in the Kingdom, with Thomas himself being heralded as the "Genius of Culinary Innovation."

But Thomas knew he was no genius. He had just been lucky. In the darkness of the storage room where he kept his wheat was a mysterious black door that he just happened to come across while he was still in the business. The shop on

the other side of that door opened some thirty years ago to the people in this world (though it had apparently existed for over fifty years), and that was when Thomas began visiting it once every twenty-eight days not as a customer but as a merchant.

Thomas had recently stepped down from his position as the head of the business and left it to his grandson, opting for a quieter lifestyle. However, he made a promise with the previous master of the shop. For as long as each of their respective businesses continued to stay open, they would continue to trade with one another. Since Thomas had quite a bit of free time on his hands thanks to his new lifestyle, he prepared to head beyond the door on the Day of Satur.

“All right, this should be everything,” Thomas quietly said to himself after confirming that everything the master ordered was in the trusty bag he’d used since he was a young lad. The door in the room he was in appeared only on the Day of Satur and could only be used once. As soon as the door was shut, or three hundred seconds passed, it would disappear, not allowing further entry. The other customers informed him that that was the rule of the door to the Restaurant to Another World. This was why he always made sure to check that he had everything he needed before turning the knob.

With everything in place, Thomas turned to his grandson, whom he was taking with him for the first time.

“Shall we, Sirius?”

“Is this door really connected to another world, Grandfather? I agree that it’s quite odd to have such a splendid door in our company’s old storage room, but still...”

Thomas’s grandson and now head of the business, Sirius, wore a confused look on his face.

“I don’t blame you for doubting me,” Thomas laughed.

While adventurers who traveled the world or elves well studied in the ways of magic might not find the idea so odd, Thomas and his grandson were but simple businessmen. It sounded like nothing more than a fairy tale to the average human. The only people who would believe that such a thing existed here were

the kind who spent their days with their heads in the clouds.

“You’ll see when we get there. Fear not. While it is another world, it’s not altogether different from our own. Most importantly, you could say that the Alfade Company is deeply indebted to the shop beyond this door.”

Thomas placed his hand on the brass doorknob and turned it. The door opened, accompanied by a familiar ringing.

“Indebted to...? What sort of shop is it?” Sirius asked his grandfather as the older man was already moving to enter the doorway.

“A Restaurant to Another World.” Thomas made his way into the establishment in question, stepping away from the darkness of the storage room and into the well-lit interior that greeted him.

“Welcome... Ah, Thomas! Hold on just a sec.” The master had just finished cleaning the tables with a wet rag. There were no other customers in sight, just the sounds of a pot boiling in the kitchen. Thomas made it a habit to try and visit the restaurant early before any customers came. He didn’t want to disturb the patronage.

“Mind if we sit down while we wait?”

“Of course not. I just finished cleaning that table, so feel free to hunker down. By the way, who might this be?”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Sirius, Thomas’s grandson. Thank you for everything you’ve done for him.” Sirius smiled and politely bowed his head to the master, the mark of a good merchant.

“I’ll be bringing him by with me every now and then, so I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not in the least! So you’re his grandson... You do look a bit like Thomas when he was younger,” the master replied.

Thomas’s relationship with this restaurant started nearly thirty years ago, so he was more than familiar with the current master, having known him since he was just a young boy. On the flip side, the master knew Thomas well as one of his grandfather’s regular customers. The two men shared not just a strong

business relationship but friendship as well.

“Wait just a moment, and I’ll get you two some coffee.” The master retreated to the back.

“Coffee?”

“A kind of tea from this world. It’s black and quite bitter, but once you get used to it, it’s delicious. It even gives you energy.” Thomas gave his grandson a brief explanation of the drink while happily watching the young man look around the restaurant’s interior.

“Curious, right?”

“Yes. So this is really a different world?” Sirius cast his gaze at the unfamiliar objects decorating the restaurant.

“Indeed it is. Take a good look around. You can tell that the decor and overall layout all deviate from what we consider customary.”

“I see... You’re right.” As a merchant in the capital, Sirius had laid his eyes on all sorts of goods. He knew from instinct that his grandfather’s words made sense.

The first thing that stood out were the bright lights. Even if powered by magic, they should have been slightly dimmer. Then there were a plethora of beautifully shaped glass containers. After looking more carefully, the container with black liquid in it appeared to be transparent but wasn’t actually made of glass. Nor was it ceramic. His grandfather was right. Sirius wasn’t in a foreign nation but a completely different world.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here are your coffees.” The master set down two cups of fragrant black liquid in front of them, along with a small gold pitcher filled with milk.

“Many thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome. I’ll go grab the proceeds.”

The master once again disappeared into the kitchen.

“Shall we? Sirius, could you pass me that blue pot... The sugar’s inside of it.”

“Oh, of course. Wow, this sugar is incredibly high quality. It’s pure white!” Sirius passed along the small pot of sugar, and Thomas took two spoonfuls of what would undoubtedly be considered the highest quality of sugar that the Alfade Company sold, mixing it into his coffee.

Thomas always had his coffee with two spoonfuls of sugar and no milk. Over his many years visiting the restaurant, this was his favorite way of indulging in the beverage.

“Mm, delicious.” The older man sipped his coffee. He’d heard from another restaurant regular that far across the ocean in the Desert Nation was a similar sort of drink. The white sugar with its pure flavor and the uniquely scented coffee’s slightly sour bitterness fused into one, spreading throughout Thomas’s mouth and leaving a sweet, sharp aftertaste behind on his tongue.

Along with the sensation of relief settling through his body, he also felt newly energized. Being given a cup of coffee for free was secretly one of Thomas’s favorite things about coming here.

“Come now, drink up before it gets cold,” Thomas urged his grandson. “I recommend sugar and milk. It’ll be easier to drink down that way.”

“Okay. Here goes...” Sirius added two spoonfuls of sugar just like his grandfather, and after taking a sip, added some milk.

“I see... The sour and bitter flavors really make for a unique taste. This is quite good.” The lightly sweetened coffee put a smile on the young man’s face.

The cost of acquiring sugar made from sugar cane in the south had dropped significantly since the war against the demon race came to an end many years ago, allowing for safe travel and trade with the Western Continent across the ocean. That said, it was still an important product worth many silver coins. Pure sugar could even cost as much as medicine.

The Alfade Company had deeper pockets than your average noble family’s enterprise, but they tended to not spend on anything that wasn’t economical, so there were few chances to enjoy something as sweet as this.

I guess he’s still a kid at heart if sweet things make him that happy, Thomas thought. He watched with a smile as his grandson reacted to downing the hot

coffee in one gulp. Due to being born into the Alfade Company, Sirius lacked certain merchant qualities that one would normally have to learn through hard work. That said, he was both a quick thinker and knew how to best utilize the people around him. Thomas was quite proud of his grandson. After a period of time enjoying and finishing the otherworldly coffee, the pair were approached by the master, who held a silver box.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. These are today’s proceeds from the restaurant. May I take that bag?”

“Yes, of course. While you handle that, I’ll count this.” Thomas handed the master the empty cups and large bag he’d brought with him.

“Thank you kindly. I’m going to head up top for a moment.”

Thomas watched the master go upstairs before turning his attention to the silver box in front of him and opening it.

“Wow, there are eight old elven silver coins in there.”

“Mmhm. That’s the usual.”

For some reason, every time Thomas came to retrieve the box of earnings, there would be these silver coins present. Normally, one would have to be a noble family to even have these in their possession. Either that, or they’d have to be an elf themselves, or an adventurer who went digging through elven ruins. The production of these coins had ceased more than a millennia ago, which meant they were the highest value currency a person could get their hands on. This box contained eight of those coins, forty-one silver coins from various locales, and nearly seven hundred copper coins.

In this silver box was the Restaurant to Another World’s entire earnings for the month.

“Hm, interesting. The earnings are a bit higher than last month’s.” Thomas used his sharpened merchant skills to estimate the general amount in the box.

“Wait, this is the restaurant’s earnings?” Sirius asked.

“Precisely.” The master gave his earnings to Thomas every single month. “And that bag he took is my payment.” The contents of the big bag were what he

gave the master in exchange for the coins.

“You mean the ingredients?” said Sirius.

The items that Thomas had brought included high-quality foodstuffs that only the Alfade Company could get their hands on. It also had ordinary goods one might find at a market, like wheat flour, common meats, and various types of vegetables. The bag also contained goods that had been carried across the ocean from other countries, and even monster meat delicacies that hunters and adventurers put their lives on the line to procure. The deal Thomas had with the Restaurant to Another World was that he would provide the shop with these kinds of ingredients, and in turn he would acquire their monthly earnings.

“Exactly. Well, occasionally he’ll ask for healing medicines and the like, but generally speaking, I sell him ingredients.”

“Huh.” Sirius nodded his head in response. This was the sort of deal that absolutely made sense to the number one food provider in the kingdom, the Alfade Company.

“But what does he do with that stuff? That’s not nearly enough to supply this kind of restaurant.”

As far as Sirius could tell, the Restaurant to Another World’s monthly earnings were somewhere below ten gold coins. If this place was only open once every seven days, that meant it was making around two gold coins a day. There was no way the amount of food that someone as old as Thomas could carry was enough to last the entire month.

“Oh, that’s for the master himself to eat, apparently.”

Thomas had the same question for the previous master when he first came to him with the deal. That was his answer.

“He eats them? The gentleman who was just here?”

“Correct. His predecessor did the same. He says he uses them to research flavors.”

The amount of food in the bag simply wasn’t enough to feed all of the restaurant’s customers, and according to the master, even if it was, there was a

“sanitation” problem, whatever that meant. That’s why he ate it himself. He and his predecessor called it “research.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know much about how chefs think, but...” Thomas gave a simple explanation to his confused grandson. Long ago, the master had told him why he wanted ingredients from their world.

In the Restaurant to Another World, humans from Thomas’s world were considered guests. The master normally dealt with customers from his world, a place called “Japan,” so all of the meals were designed for their sense of taste. Luckily, there wasn’t a huge disconnect, but it was still a bit different.

In order to make sure he could make dishes that would please people from the other world, he experimented with their ingredients and figured out what would suit them best. This was how the master went about fine-tuning his dishes for their palates.

“He goes out of his way to do all of that?” Sirius looked baffled by Thomas’s explanation. Truth be told, he couldn’t quite understand the value of going to all that trouble, considering the master’s monthly earnings and the fact that he was only open once a week.

“Well, apparently this whole opening once a week for our world thing is kind of like a hobby to him. As long as he can feed his customers good food and make them smile, he’s happy. That’s one of the things about him that’s exactly like his predecessor,” Thomas explained as he chuckled.

In retrospect, the previous master also consider cooking both his job and his hobby. It had been thirty years since the Restaurant to Another World opened its doors to Thomas’s world. He was more than aware that one of the reasons the place was so beloved even now was because of the hard work that both masters put into running the place.

“Everything looks good. Thank you so much.” Holding two menus in his hands, the master came back to their table.

“As always, I’d be happy to treat you to whatever dish you’d like. You as well, Sirius.” He placed the menus down in front of the pair.

“Then I’ll get the usual. Let’s see, a large order of spaghetti with meat sauce. Will that do for you, too, Sirius?” Thomas didn’t even have to open the menu to order.

“Yes, sir. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Got it. That’s two large orders of spaghetti with meat sauce.”

With a nod, the master returned to the kitchen in the back and soon re-appeared holding the goods.

“Here you are.” He placed down two large plates of noodles in front of the men. Next to those were shining silver spoons and green tubes of some kind. On top of the noodles was a bright red sauce with plentiful amounts of shredded meat mixed into it.

“That’s the ticket. You really can’t have spaghetti without meat sauce!”

To Thomas, spaghetti with meat sauce wasn’t just a dish he enjoyed eating at Nekoya. It was the beginning of everything. In the last thirty years, the number of noodle dishes around the world had grown exponentially. There was a time when he ate all kinds of pasta dishes in search of better tastes, starting with the neapolitan, a pasta that could hold its own against spaghetti with meat sauce. But at the end of the day, his true goal remained this dish.

“Wait a second, Grandfather.” Meanwhile, Sirius had realized that he recognized the dish in front of him. He asked his grandfather for an explanation with a troubled expression on his face.

Thomas said but one thing. “Come now, you’ll understand once you take a bite. You’ll see. Now let’s dig in before it gets cold.” He picked up the glistening silver fork next to the plate and pressed it into the pasta, mixed it together with the meat sauce, and gulped before taking a bite.

Delicious. Thomas treated himself to this meal quite frequently, and yet his first response was always the same.

The first sensation to hit him was that of the meat stewed in the sauce. Its flavor was truly something special. One could tell that the cow this tender, savory meat came from was carefully raised not to till the fields but so that it could produce the best taste possible. The high-quality, fatty pork was similar.

These two great tastes came together and spread like a wave throughout Thomas's mouth. Each of these meats on their own would be delicious if cooked the normal way, but mincing and stewing them together produced a singular taste unachievable by themselves. Normally, mixing was a tactic used to hide the bad taste of cheap meat that was on the verge of going bad, but by using only high-quality ingredients, it gave birth to an altogether new flavor.

Wrapped around that high-quality meat was the core of the meat sauce, a vegetable from the other world that most closely resembled stewed marmett. Its flavor was the foundation of the entire meal. Thomas thought back to some ten years prior, when he excitedly discovered a food made from dried marmetts in a tiny country most folks in the Kingdom had never heard of. Stewing and crushing them into a liquid brought out the marmett's sweet, tart taste and savory quality. This bright red sauce complemented the meat wonderfully, bringing out the latter's dormant flavors.

Thinly sliced mushrooms, crushed and roasted nuts, plus oranie sauteed in oil along with a variety of different herbs... We've still got a long way to go.

Thomas took his time savoring the noodles and then let out a breath of air. When was it that he became capable of recognizing the complex number of ingredients that went into this sauce?

When he was still but a young man and discovered this restaurant, the first time he ate the previous master's spaghetti and meat sauce, he devoured it in one go. Thomas knew that it was delicious, but he couldn't put into words why exactly it was. That was the impact the dish had on his young mind. It was so incredible that it made him doubt whether the noodles his family sold were even really for eating.

"Hm. So, what do you think, Sirius? How does the pasta from another world taste?" Thomas asked his grandson, who was still holding his mouth in disbelief after a single bite. He eventually snapped back to his senses.

"How is this restaurant selling dishes we've yet to release to the public?!" Sirius had recognized this flavor.

It tasted much like marmett sauce.

Marmett sauce was made from a vegetable that they had gone through great

pains to consistently produce in the Kingdom. They spent money on bringing farmers over from a fairly unknown, tiny country, and had them work together with scholars to solve the problem and create an environment in which the marmett could be cultivated.

The Alfade Company was planning on releasing this “new” sauce to the public during the summer. What Sirius took a bite of mere moments ago was extremely similar, except that its flavor was even more polished than their own product’s.

“Wait, don’t tell me...” Hit with a realization, Sirius immediately looked at the restaurant’s menu and its list of dishes, carefully reading the descriptions next to them. He finally understood why his grandfather considered himself indebted to this place.

“Grandfather, did you...”

“Precisely. I’m no Genius of Culinary Innovation. That title means nothing. I just desperately wanted to eat this kind of food on our side of the door.” Sirius’s grandfather confirmed it all, grateful that the day had finally come when he could let the heavy weight off of his shoulders.

Thomas Alfade was a merchant. Regardless of his motivations, being a merchant meant selling something if one felt it would be profitable to do so. That was how the glory of the Alfade Company came to be.

“Shall we continue?” Thomas reached over and grabbed the green tube, and one of the glass containers filled with red liquid.

“This green tube contains cheese grated down to a powder. Sprinkling a bit of it over the sauce mellows the taste. This red liquid is called tabasco sauce. It has the spiciness of pepel and the sourness of vinegar. It really brings out the flavor of the meat sauce.”

Thomas knew this was the first time his grandson would be eating any of this, so he carefully explained each element to him. Little by little, he carefully put both the cheese and tabasco sauce on his own pasta. Part of what made spaghetti with meat sauce such a fantastic dish was how one could adjust it to their own liking.

“Be careful at first. If you put too much of either on top, you’ll ruin the flavor.” The older man thought back on his own screwups.

First, he poured a dash of tabasco onto the meat sauce and took a bite. Doing so added a kick of hotness to the sour marmett and the savory meat. Adding too much would make even the strongest man’s eyes water, but just the right amount highlighted the other flavors of the dish.

Next, he added a touch of grated cheese. This, too, had great chemistry with the flavor of the marmett, boosting its deliciousness. However, putting too much of it on top would make the dish powdery, with the flavor of the cheese overpowering everything else. After carefully adding the right amount of both to the dish, Thomas spun some spaghetti and meat sauce around his fork and took a bite.

I really should look into selling these at the company... Ha ha, what am I saying? I’m already retired!

The combination of cheesy, sour, and spicy flavors blended with the savory meat sauce to create a new experience from the one before. As usual, Thomas found himself tremendously satisfied. In fact, it was enough to make him forget that he already retired from the business. After snapping back to his senses with a laugh, he switched into customer mode again and dug in.

“Hello! You’re open already, right?” Behind Thomas came the voice of an early customer.

After finishing their meal and enjoying another cup of coffee, Sirius and his grandfather exited the restaurant. As the door behind them closed, it immediately vanished into thin air. They were once again alone in the dark storage room.

“Grandfather...” Sirius seemed lost in thought as he opened his mouth to speak. With the door gone, it was almost as though everything that had happened was nought but a dream. However, the reality was that in exchange for the large bag of ingredients they had carried on them, they now had a bag filled with coins. The aftertaste of the meat sauce still lingered as well. It wasn’t a dream.

It was reality. Sirius was at a loss for words.

“One can only go to that place once every seven days,” Thomas explained to his grandson, clearly enjoying his reaction. “I’ll be going there once every four weeks, but feel free to go as much as you’d like.”

The older man was stepping down as a “customer.”

“Are you sure?” Sirius couldn’t help but lick his lips, the remaining flavor of the meat sauce filling his mouth. He was beginning to understand the meaning of his grandfather’s words.

“But of course. I’m sure the master wouldn’t mind having you there as a customer and not a business partner.” The older man reluctantly nodded his head. Thomas, already well into his later years, recognized as a merchant that it was about time to leave things in the hands of his young, capable grandson.

“Thank you, Grandfather! Oh, geez. I wonder what I should try next...”

Thomas narrowed his eyes and looked at his grandson. There was no doubt in his mind that the young man was going to visit the restaurant again in seven days time. Perhaps Sirius would accomplish his old goal of reproducing the noodle dishes from another world. Thomas himself had only managed to do so for less than half of them.

Chapter 7:

Omelet Rice In the southern region of the Eastern Continent were the warm marshlands. This was where the monsters known as lizardmen lived. These reptilian humanoids had powerful muscles and unique water magic. Since the times of old, lizardmen made the marshlands their home, feeding off of local wildlife like alligators, birds, and fish.

Gaganpo was the respected hero of the Blue Tails, one of the lizardmen tribes. Today was the special day that came once every seven days, so he was cleaning his body of the dirt from the hunt. He bathed his bulk in clean water in the small washing space near where his people lived. When hunting, lizardmen would dive into the mud, using stone axes and spears to kill their prey without them even noticing. This meant that they were often covered in all sorts of muck.

Earlier that day, Gaganpo hunted down a massive alligator, and so now he was washing away the filth with water. With the dirt gone, his sculpted body was visible for all to see. In order to make sure he was truly clean, and also to dry off the cold water, he looked up toward the sun in the heavens and spread his body out, bathing in the light.

He was a lizardman of average height, his body bulging with finely toned muscles. His hide was covered in tough, green scales with a light blue tint, half-healed scars peppered throughout. His skin was hard enough to deflect a human's sword strike. It had been eight years since Gaganpo was born into the world, meaning his combat experience and youth were in their prime. The scars he wore on his body were proof that he was a hero who'd survived numerous dangerous battles.

Gaganpo wiped himself down with a cloth woven from vines. He took a moment to admire the way the sunlight reflected off of his muscular body and then turned to put his equipment on. His newly cleaned armor was made from the skin of a hydra that he led the tribe in striking down. The armor itself

resembled that which the skilled human warriors known as “knights” wore. His weapon of choice was a spear with a black stone tip, but he didn’t take it. According to a pact that was made long before Gaganpo was born, there were to be no weapons or fighting within the other world that Nekoya existed in.

“That should do it.”

Gaganpo looked at the reflection of himself in the still water and cleared his throat, nodding to himself. He was ready to go to Nekoya. The sun was directly above his head, signaling the time. Gaganpo took a deep breath and ran like a horse toward the village where Nekoya’s door would appear.

In the main square of the town waited the short village chief, his body covered in tattoos that signified his worship of the blue water god. Many other lizardmen were also waiting patiently for Gaganpo’s arrival. They slapped their tails on the ground to show their respect for the hero.

“Chief, I’m ready.”

“Good. Take care, Hero.”

On average, if a lizardman lived to be twenty years old, that was considered a long life. The male chief of this village had somehow managed to live three times that length. He nodded his head to Gaganpo.

“Gaganpo! We’ve brought the silver stones, copper stones, and the dishes!”

The children, each only about a year old, came running toward the warrior, their eyes sparkling with excitement and expectation. They carried with them a bag of flat and round silver and copper stones that they received from the neighboring human tribe in exchange for alligator skins. One of the children carried multiple wooden plates.

“Excellent. Thank you.” Gaganpo grabbed the items from the kids, finally ready to make his way to the other world.

He stood in front of the altar where the door to another world appeared. Over the years, this area had been decorated with all manner of beautiful stones and flowers. According to the chief, this door first appeared here before even he was born. This altar was built where the door initially appeared.

At the time of its first appearance, the lizardman that resolved to enter the door without knowing where it led was Gerupa, the strongest warrior in the Blue Tail Tribe at the time. On the other side, he had a fateful encounter in “Nekoya of the Other World.” He returned with amazing food from that strange place. That was the beginning of a brand new tradition: on the seventh day, whenever the black door appeared in their world, the tribe’s strongest member would travel to “Nekoya of the Other World” and bring home with them a feast. They selected this hero through a festival held every year.

“I’m going now.”

The expectant eyes of the children and women at his back, Gaganpo was greeted by the door’s bells as he stepped into the other world.

“Welcome!”

“Mm. I’m here.”

Gaganpo nodded his head to the lord of the other world; the master. Thanks to some kind of magic, the language of the lizardmen, or perhaps more accurately, the languages of their world, were automatically translated for the master. Thanks to this, Gaganpo found it easier to talk to the middle-aged man than he did the humans of his own world.

“Omelet rice. Large. Also three omelets to go.” Gaganpo sat himself down and handed the master three wooden plates, making the usual order. The master of this world had taught the hero how to order food when he first visited this strange place. By giving the human man silver and copper stones, Gaganpo would in return be treated to an otherworldly feast.

“Gotcha. Hang on just a second.” The master took the large wooden plates and returned to the back.

While Gaganpo waited, his eyes darted around the interior of the restaurant. It was around noon, which meant there were already other customers present. He spotted an elf with bent ears, a short, bearded dwarf, and even a human. They were all residents of his world that also crossed over via a black door. According to the human tribe with which the lizardmen traded stones and skins, there was a vast world outside of the marshlands. To Gaganpo, who had grown up and lived there all of his life, this was a difficult tale to swallow.

And yet, simply by passing through a doorway, Gaganpo found himself in a place like this. The other customers seemed to be enjoying their delicious meals. Their races and hometowns were all different, but they shared the same objective. That was the reason why bloody battles never erupted here.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’ll bring over the takeout when you’re ready to leave.”

“Mm. Many thanks.”

Gaganpo was finally face to face with his true objective. It was a yellow food with colorful, bright red lines decorating its surface. Gaganpo gulped at the mere scent of cooked eggs wafting up from the dish called “omelet rice.” He joyfully grabbed the sparkling spoon next to him.

“Thank you for this meal.”

Gaganpo recited the holy words that those of this world spoke before meals and brought his spoon down to the plate. The egg broke immediately, so soft that the spoon effortlessly sunk into it. The insides of the omelet revealed themselves to be packed with some kind of red filling. Further in was a sort of orange, grounded goodness. The bright green beans served as a wonderful contrast to the other colors. The salted chicken meat, otherworldly mushrooms that couldn’t be found in warm regions, and the host of other vegetables were all diced up into small pieces, coming together to form one delicious food wrapped in the warm embrace of the yellow egg.

This is truly an otherworldly dish, Gaganpo thought as he brought the small spoon carrying a host of different ingredients to his mouth.

“Mm.”

The mix of flavors spreading throughout Gaganpo’s mouth was the same he experienced three years ago when he was first selected as the hero of his tribe and stepped through the black door. Needless to say, the first part of the meal to wage war on Gaganpo’s mouth was the egg. As a race, the lizardmen spent much time researching how to replicate this flavor using alligator eggs found in the marshlands but found little success. They simply couldn’t emulate the omelet’s perfectly soft texture.

The dish in front of Gaganpo tasted of both milk and butter, with a strong saltiness and a mild sweetness to it. Bringing all of that intense flavor together was the sour red sauce on top. If this meal were just the egg and red sauce, that alone could be described as a tremendous feast and accomplishment.

But everything that came after was equally delicious. The chicken, likely salted to preserve it, released its savory juices the moment one took a bite. Meanwhile, the other world's thinly sliced mushrooms had a rich, earthy flavor all their own.

The orange dust coated the minced and stir-fried otherworldly vegetables, bringing their flavors together under one umbrella. It was that very same taste that Gaganpo was now experiencing as he swallowed down a bit of the omelet rice. Fortunately for him, there was still plenty to go.

Gaganpo hurriedly began to move his spoon again. Despite his plate being over twice the size of all the other customers', he made the food atop it disappear in but an instant.

"Mm. Seconds," he ordered, before he had even finished his first serving.

"Aye."

Three years had passed since the first time the lizardman ate this dish. Like all the heroes before him, he too became addicted to its great taste. Eventually, he finished his meal and took a satisfied breath. With his stomach full, he felt overcome with joy.

"All done." Gaganpo recited the holy words used to mark the end of a meal in this world and waited for the master to come back.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Here are your three omelets to go."

"Mm, they're ready?"

The master came out with three plates, almost as if he had been waiting for Gaganpo to finish his meal before reappearing. On each plate was a massive omelet. Each of the plates were in a see-through bag of some kind, all for the lizardmen back in his village.

"Mm. Payment." Gaganpo confirmed the contents of the plates and opened

his own bag, showing the master the silver and copper stones inside of it. The human man reached in and pulled out exactly the right amount that he required.

“Thanks as always!”

Upon hearing the master’s words, Gaganpo closed up his bag and put it back on his waist. To him, these silver and copper stones had the same value as your average rock on the road. At most, you could maybe throw them like some sort of basic weapon. That said, for as long as the tribe could remember, the master of this restaurant preferred silver and copper stones to other things like dried fish or black stones that could be turned into weapons. This held true even now.

The master had taken three trips to bring each plate out, one by one, but Gaganpo easily lifted all of them in one go. He held one in his right hand, one in his left, and one with his tail.

“Farewell.” Gaganpo headed toward the exit.

“We look forward to your next visit!”

“Mm.”

Gaganpo nodded to the master who politely opened the door for him and stepped outside. He was back in the village square, right in front of the altar. Around the area were a number of lizardmen, eagerly anticipating his return and watching the altar intently.

“I return with feast in hand!”

The hero triumphantly raised all three plates into the air, causing the lizardmen to beat their tails against the ground and cry out in joy. Shortly thereafter, the young women of the tribe approached Gaganpo and took the large plates from him. They then placed the bagged meals in front of the chief, who carefully made sure not to tear the bags’ skins as he unwrapped each dish. The lizardmen were immediately entranced by the aroma freed from the see-through wrapping.

To them, there were few things more important than this yellow egg dish. All of the lizardmen anxiously swallowed down the saliva that built up in their

mouths. The chief used a sharpened black stone to cut into each omelet, making sure to cut equal sized pieces for all who were present.

A simple stir-fry of finely cut meat and oranie leaked out of the omelet on the first plate. The savory quality of the meat, which had been lightly seasoned with salt and pepper, combined with the faint sweetness of the oranie. This made the flavors of the egg and red sauce easy to recognize, leaving room for each individual ingredient to be enjoyed on their own.

White cheese and stir-fried smoked meat oozed out of the second omelet. Cheese, a human food with an incredibly unique flavor to it, and meat that had been salted and smoked, were both foods that couldn't be found in the marshlands. The smoked meat had a flavor that one couldn't replicate by simply cooking meat, and when layered with the cheese, created a melting sensation in the mouth.

Inside the third omelet were a bunch of small shripes covered in white, sweet cream. The cream, being the sweetest ingredient of the three dishes, complemented the fresh flavor of the shripe quite nicely.

The lizardmen's eyes instinctively narrowed in response to the poignant aromas surrounding them. In order to make sure that everyone in the village got a piece, each lizardman could only take from one omelet. Which would they choose? If only they could have them all. More than a few lizardmen were asking themselves that very question as they waited for the chief's magic words.

...And then.

"You may eat!" As the individual responsible for portioning out the food, the chief had the right to pick from whichever plate he wanted. He grabbed a piece of the cheese omelet, and soon the other lizardmen began to politely battle over the other pieces. Each chunk was smaller than the palms of their hands. That mattered little to them. This was a feast they could only experience once every seven days. To the lizardmen born into the Blue Tail Tribe, this was their most highly valued treasure.



While some swallowed their portion whole and others took small bites, they all happily beat their tails against the ground as they ate.

Gaganpo was the only lizardman to stand back and simply watch. As the hero, he was special in that he was allowed to eat his fill at the restaurant. The trade-off was that he would be exempt from the celebration proper. Gaganpo couldn't help but be slightly disappointed, even if he understood why that was the case.

Well, not much longer till the next festival, eh?

Watching the proceedings reminded him of the meal he ate moments earlier. The position of village hero was a highly coveted one thanks to its culinary perks. There were plenty of other warriors vying for his spot.

Gaganpo didn't plan on letting anyone else take his spot though, not when there were more delicious omelets on the line.

I will remain this village's hero. And then...

He would eat as many omelets as possible over the next year.

Gaganpo, the hero of the Blue Tail Tribe, hardened his resolve yet again and slapped his tail against the ground with a loud thud.

Chapter 8:

Chocolate Parfait The imperial princess had a vague memory from her past.

When Adelheid was but a child, she ate clouds.

It was during the height of summer when she was on vacation to the palace outside of the imperial capital. As far as Adelheid could remember, these trips to the palace were a yearly tradition. The only difference was that that year, neither of her parents went with her. She later discovered from her history teacher that the reason they weren't present was because the Empire was preparing for war with a neighboring country in an attempt to annex them. The year Adelheid was born into the world, her father accepted the seat of emperor from her grandfather, making him the second monarch in the Empire's brief history. This was the perfect opportunity for him to display his power to the world and acquire a port nation, something the Empire had sorely lacked until then. Her father poured everything into the coming war, which meant there was no time for vacationing.

It was also during this time that Adelheid's mother was pregnant with her little brother, restricting her to the inner palace in the imperial capital. As a result, the aides who had served as Adelheid's playmates and friends also remained in the city, unable to accompany her to the palace.

Thus, the then four-year-old Adelheid was forced to go to the palace outside of the city all by herself. While her time there was nothing but comfortable due to being surrounded by servants as well as the presence of her grandfather, it was an incredibly lonely experience. She missed the city and often cried to herself at night.

That was when things changed.

Her grandfather had spent fifty years of his life building the small country that was the Empire up into the mighty power it was, and then stepped down from that position. It was he who grabbed her tiny hand and led her to the hidden chamber. Her grandfather had ordered the construction of this palace after his retirement and knew it better than anybody else. The room he brought young

Adelheid to was quite the secret.

“Listen well, Adelheid. This is a secret between you and me. I wouldn’t want to have less of it for myself.”

The secret chamber’s entrance was a black door with a picture of a cat on the front. Adelheid’s grandfather smiled and patted her on the head with his large hand. She remembered it feeling wrinkly but surprisingly cool.

The old man opened the door in front of them. The bells on the entrance rang pleasantly, and the two of them passed through.

Unfortunately, Adelheid could barely recall what the inside of the secret chamber looked like. She recalled lots of chairs and tables, and that the room was quite bright. Her grandfather spoke to another older man there, but she hadn’t the slightest idea what they said. If nothing else, she remembered their conversation being too difficult for her to understand.

The old man noticed Adelheid politely sitting still in her chair, bored, and smiled at her. “Oh, my apologies, little lady. This must be pretty dang boring for you, huh? I know! How about we get you something sweet?” He turned to a younger man nearby.

“Hey, dummy! You said you worked part-time at a cafe back in college, right? Can you make one of those things? We got the glasses for ’em here, but I’m just not great at making ’em.”

“C’mon, why you gotta call me a dummy, Gramps?! Geez... And what do you even mean by ‘one of those’? Ah, wait. I get it now.”

That was all it took for the younger man to seemingly understand what the older man was referring to. After a little while, he reappeared holding “it.”

“Here you go, little lady. This one’s on Gramps, so dig in!”

Adelheid had no idea what it was that she was presented with. What she did know was that it was so beautiful that she didn’t want to eat it at first. That feeling disappeared the second she took a bite. This strange treat she was eating for the first time had a black pattern running through its white surface. It was also soft, sweet, and incredibly cold... In any case, it was more delicious than anything she had ever eaten in her entire life. Or at least that’s how she

remembered it.

“Isn’t that great, Adelheid?”

The princess had completely forgotten herself in the moment, her mouth sticky with the cold treat as she kept digging in. Her grandfather patted her on the head. He was eating something completely different.

“Grandfather, what is this?!” Adelheid had a memory of asking her grandfather this very question. She also recalled him looking slightly troubled as he tried to answer.

“Well, uh, it’s a cloud!”

“A cloud?”

“Indeed! A winter cloud with lots of snow on it! It’s delicious and cold, right?”

“Yeah!”

In retrospect, that day was the first time she smiled that entire summer. This was all she could remember from the special day in which “clouds” became her number one favorite food. Of course, Adelheid was no fool. Now sixteen years of age, she recognized that these memories were probably naught but a dream.

In winter of the year she tasted the clouds, Adelheid’s grandfather Wilhelm, the first emperor and founder of the Great Empire of the Eastern Continent, passed away. His was a peaceful death; he laid in bed in his palace, a giant smile on his face. To the young Adelheid who didn’t yet understand the nature of death, all she knew was a deep sadness that she would never see her beloved grandfather again. She remembered crying for days. With him gone, she would also never be able to confirm whether her memories of the “cloud” were real or not.

Just before the first emperor passed away, Adelheid’s little brother was born into the world. As older sister to the imperial prince, and royalty in her own right, she spent her days in comfort. That is, until she turned sixteen and came down with a rare illness that only affected young people. As a result, she was now living in her grandfather’s palace, traveling the long road to recovery.

“Here you are, Princess Adelheid. Please try not to lose heart.”

“I know. I’m fine,” she said, though she had to speak through a persistent cough.

Adelheid’s room at the palace was as beautiful as the one in the capital. In fact, it was the same one that the previous emperor used as his own. Upon arriving, she began to cough.

“A-are you all right, Princess?” the servant asked.

“I’m fine. I’m just a little tired from the journey here. Please don’t worry.”

One of the servants Adelheid’s father had sent along to help with her recovery came rushing to her side. She was there in the event that the princess’s symptoms began to worsen. While she was to see to Adelheid’s everyday needs, she was also a priestess of the Earth God, gifted with the Iron Sigil. This meant that she could use all manner of healing spells.

Adelheid raised her hand up, signaling that nothing was wrong.

“I see, thank goodness.”

The servant took a step back from Adelheid, a gesture that stung the young girl’s tender heart.

That’s cruel, Adelheid thought. It’s not like I asked to be sick.

Adelheid understood, though. The girl in front of her was merely a priestess-in-training. If a priest with a Silver Sigil, or even a high priest with a Gold Sigil did not possess the magic to heal her, how could she? Adelheid’s sickness was a “peasant killer” that could only be healed by quarantining yourself for years. While it rarely spread from one person to the next, it only made sense that royalty, nobles, and peasants alike were afraid of it. And yet all the logic in the world was not enough to heal the girl’s wounded heart.

Just a month ago, she had been living in the imperial capital, admiring flowers and butterflies in the garden. Now she was sick and all of a sudden was forced to live away from her beloved family in a palace filled with unknown faces.

Best case scenario, I’ll have to live here for the next two years.

Adelheid found herself shivering at this cold reality.

After Wilhelm passed away, only a handful of servants from the old days remained in the mostly unused palace. New ones had of course been hired specifically for this occasion, but they were all from the neighboring town. This place was the exact opposite of the lovely home she used to live in. Until her sickness was cured, Adelheid would have to live here like some kind of hermit. She felt herself growing gloomy at the prospect.

“If you need anything, please call for me at any time.” With that, the servant quietly left her master to rest.

After the young woman left, Adelheid collapsed onto the extravagant bed in front of her and began to quietly cry. She was all alone in the world, struggling against her own cursed fate. From this day forth, she would live in this beautiful cell-like room, with no joy or happiness to be found anywhere. This was the start of her new, dark life.

It wasn't until three days later that something changed.

Adelheid was reading a book when all of a sudden she felt a breeze blow by her. Her window was supposed to be closed to prevent the cold air from exacerbating her illness, yet there was a breeze. How could that be possible? Confused, Adelheid looked in the direction the wind came from and widened her eyes at what she found.

Huh? I don't recall there being a door here...

Doubting her sight, Adelheid rubbed her eyes for a moment before re-confirming that there was in fact a mysterious door in her room. It had been three days since she'd started living here, and yet she never once noticed it. No, she was sure there hadn't been a black door with a cat picture on it yesterday. This strange object, clearly made from different materials than everything else around it, was stuck to the wall of her bedroom.

What is this? I feel like I've seen this door somewhere before...

Adelheid quizzically cast her gaze on the door as she brushed her hand along its smooth surface. For some reason, it felt familiar. She couldn't recall the circumstances, but she thought she remembered seeing it a long time ago. She

unconsciously gulped and readied herself to open it up.

What could be on the other side?

Common sense said that it'd be linked to the room next door, but there was no room next to Wilhelm's. So where could this door possibly lead to? She wasn't sure, but for some reason she wasn't worried. All that resided in her heart was the hope that this would alleviate her boredom and the expectation of something, anything, existing beyond it. Adelheid herself didn't even realize that she was hoping for something, even as she couldn't recall what waited for her just beyond.

The black door smoothly opened.

Ring, ring.

"Welcome... Oh?"

A middle-aged man wearing clean-cut, well-tailored clothes and an apron cast his eyes on Adelheid and tilted his head.

"Um, excuse me," she asked. "Where is this?"

There were tables lined up with chairs everywhere. Even though the shop had no windows, it was as bright as if it were the middle of the day. This was completely different from the palace she currently lived in. But there was something familiar about this place... As she continued to struggle with her old memories, the shop's owner responded to her.

"A-ah, this is 'Nekoya,' a restaurant. Folks from your 'side' call it the Restaurant to Another World... Ah!"

On the other hand, the master finally realized why the young girl in front of him seemed so familiar despite this seeming to be her first visit.

"I remember now! Miss, you're Croquette's...er, Wilhelm's granddaughter, right?"

He remembered her quite clearly. Nekoya rarely got customers younger than the high school students in the area, never mind ones from the other world. One of the regulars who hadn't been by in over ten years once brought his little granddaughter to the restaurant. The young lady had grown to be quite

beautiful since her last visit, though she still retained some of her childlike features. The master remembered her making a similar face the first time she visited.

“Oh, my! You knew my grandfather?!” Adelheid’s eyes widened with expectation at the man’s words.

While anybody who lived in the Empire knew of the great emperor, very few people knew him personally. More importantly, the fact that the master referred to him without his title spoke volumes. There were few who would refer to the man who built the Great Empire by name. Only fellow royalty or people he considered friends were allowed to do as much.

So who was this strange man, then? Adelheid’s mind was buzzing with questions.

“Yeah, I did. He was a customer here for a good, long while, so... How about it? Care to grab a bite? It’ll be on the house today.” The master’s words were kind. He was happy to have remembered the face of an old regular he hadn’t seen in so many years.

Now that the master thought about it, the young girl’s grandfather loved his precursor’s croquettes but never did get around to trying his own food. In that case, he felt it’d be appropriate to at least treat his granddaughter to something good.

“A bite...? Ah!”

Meanwhile, the moment Adelheid heard the master’s words, everything clicked. The sweet memory from her youth came rushing back. The memory of a time when her grandfather was still alive and well. That’s right, this was where she...

“In the case, um... I’d like to eat a ‘cloud.’”

...Ate something positively delicious.

“A cloud..? Oh, I gotcha!”

The master thought back on the last time the young girl had visited and nodded his head. He remembered the dish he served her some ten years prior.

“We’ll bring it right out.” The master returned to the kitchen and began to work.

The previous master had never been particularly great at making sweets. He didn’t really grow up eating them when he was younger. Back when he was still an apprentice, the current master had included a hidden dessert option on his grandfather’s menu. When he finally took over, he made it a proper menu item.

After a brief wait, the master came back to Adelheid with “clouds” in hand.

“Here you are. Your ‘chocolate parfait.’” He placed the mysterious food down right in front of her.

“Oh, my...” Adelheid uttered to herself, her eyes tracing the beautiful arrangement of food resting on the table.

“Enjoy!”

The master returned to the back, leaving Adelheid to be entranced by the parfait. All that remained at the table was the princess and her chocolate parfait.

It looks more like a colorful piece of art than food...

When she first ate it as a child, all she really thought was that the clouds were beautiful. So beautiful that they couldn’t have been food, even. But now, the first thing that caught her eyes was the magnificent, transparent glass holding the food itself. It was exquisite in form, opening up like a kind of blossoming flower.

The food inside the glass was something else entirely. Adelheid’s attention was drawn to the mountain of white snow, not unlike what one found in the mountains in the northern areas of the Empire. At the very tip of the mountain was some kind of black sauce, flowing down the snow almost like a beautiful river. On top of that were tiny grains of some kind. Serving as the greenery of the mountain were a series of colorful fruits and baked treats. One side of the light brown, baked food was covered in the same black syrup as the mountain, a beautiful combination of contrasting colors.

And then there was the red berry that had been split in half and the green fruit covered in black grains. The raw colors of the fruits helped to make the

mountain of snow that much more beautiful. Beneath that was a layer comprised of white, brown, and golden brown. The fact that one could see these three colors through the transparent glass was another major charm of the dish. It was aesthetically beautiful.

As royalty, Adelheid had experienced much of what the world had to offer in terms of luxuries, and yet this beautifully colorful dish was such a shocking thing to her. If she was being completely honest, the thought of eating it seemed like a waste.

I suppose it's time to try it.

Nonetheless, there was no point in just staring at it. Adelheid quietly grabbed the polished silver spoon on the table and began to eat the parfait.

The first thing she tasted was the tip of the white mountain dripping with black syrup. She brought her spoon down into the parfait and found that it cut through with no resistance, just like a real cloud. On top of her spoon sat a tiny triangle-shaped mountain. She carefully brought it to her mouth, the sweet scent of the black syrup reaching her nose.

...Oh, my.

It was a sweet, ephemeral flavor backed by the cold feel of the spoon. Adelheid was at a loss for words. This was truly unlike any food she had ever eaten in her time in this world.

It's sweet but not too sweet.

The aromatic, slightly bittersweet taste melted away atop her tongue without her even having to chew. All that remained in her mouth was the rich sweetness of milk. Adelheid found herself in love with that flavor, though she harbored an oddly contradictory opinion of it as well. This chocolate parfait was sweet, but it wasn't too sweet. The princess struggled to wrap her mind around it.

In the Empire, the sort of expensive snacks and candies that the princess was used to eating were all sweet. It was understood that the more high-quality sugar one used to make a treat, the more luxurious it was meant to be. This was due to the shared belief on the Eastern Continent that sugar was a precious

commodity. The Empire was much the same way, and so Adelheid, the woman with the highest status in all of the Empire, was given nothing but the sweetest of treats.

But this is far more delicious than anything I've eaten in the Empire!

Adelheid always felt as though the snacks she was given were too sweet, and thus was never particularly fond of them. Yet here she was, taking spoonful after spoonful of this parfait. It was unbelievable. After every bite, she would once again dip her silver spoon into the mountain for more. With every chunk melting away atop her tongue, Adelheid's cheeks would unconsciously loosen, and her eyes narrow. As a direct result of the parfait's balanced sweetness, she could freely experience all of the other flavors that the dish had to offer, like the white substance that tasted of milk or the bittersweet black syrup that helped bring out the overall sweetness of the dish. The combination of elements melted away in her mouth, leaving behind a dream-like flavor.

The sweet and sour fruit is also wonderful!

Adelheid's spoon had two large chunks of the green and red fruit sitting atop it. The colorful fruits were just the right level of ripe. They still maintained their sweetness, but they also had a pronounced sour taste to them. It was the latter that allowed the tongue, now used to the sweetness of the parfait, to rest for a moment. This ultimately enhanced the flavor of the white and black clouds even further.

Everything else is amazing, too!

Unable to scoop the brown sweets into her spoon, Adelheid, recognizing how unbecoming of a princess it was to do this, picked one of them up with two of her slender fingers. The golden brown treat was covered in a white substance sprinkled with black all over. It had a crisp aroma and was only lightly sweetened. Adelheid also couldn't ignore the light beige fruit with a sweetness all its own, completely different from that of the clouds.

Just how many flavors are in this?

"Aaah!" Adelheid was quietly enjoying the explosion of sweet flavors in her mouth when she suddenly raised her voice. The white thing she had been eating suddenly became as cold as snow.

This is completely different from what was at the top!

This caught the young lady completely off guard. Hidden deep within the fluffy clouds were similar looking snow clouds, cold as winter itself. Unlike the ones at the top of the mountain, these clouds were super cold, slippery, and maintained their form for much longer in her mouth.

I never knew something like this existed!

The snow cloud melting atop Adelheid's warm tongue was as smooth as silk, with a sweetness that spread itself over her entire mouth. Back in the palace, she had once eaten crushed ice that the royal mages made, drowned in fruit juice and topped with honey and sugar, but this was different. This was her second time eating this.

It's a winter cloud with plenty of snow on top. And...

Adelheid recalled the words of her late grandfather as she continued to eat, eventually leading her spoon to a round clump the color of the earth. One glance at it made it clear to Adelheid that it was different from the other elements of the mountain. She drove her spoon into it without hesitation.

Sweet yet bitter... This is chocolate, is it not? Yes, this is quite good.

It was harder than the clouds above, but with a unique reserved sweetness. The cold earthen-colored stone had the same flavor as that of the black stuff at the top of the mountain. After having experienced an array of gentle and sweet flavors, its slight toughness and bitter flavor proved to be a refreshing treat.

Ah, I'm finished.

Adelheid felt a wave of sadness wash over her as she treated herself to the final baked good, still moist from absorbing the sweetness of the snow it was covered in. Its strong wheatish scent found its way to her nose. The fact that this incredible performance of flavors was coming to a close was the most unfortunate thing of all.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. Adelheid ate the final baked treat and set her spoon down on the table.

"Whew..."

Her sigh was a mix of immense satisfaction and a dash of sadness. Adelheid sat still, looking down at her empty glass.

It's been quite some time since I last felt this way.

Adelheid felt herself smiling, her stomach satisfied. Now that she thought about it, this was her first time truly smiling since getting sick. This chocolate parfait had managed to bring back her smile not once, but twice.

"You look like you're feeling better! I'm glad to see it." The young lady's satisfaction made the master smile. He brought over a pure white ceramic cup to her table. It was filled with black tea.

"Here you are. Hot coffee, on the house. If you drink it as is, it's quite bitter, so feel free to put as much sugar and milk in it as you'd like. That blue pot right there has the sugar, and this silver one has milk."

"Thank you very much." Adelheid thanked the man and took the strange coffee drink in her hands.

...Huh, this is kind of hot and bitter.

Since she'd never drank this sort of tea before, Adelheid wanted to try it "as is" first. What she found was a bitter flavor that furrowed her brows. She was fond of its aroma, but her tongue was still cold after devouring the chocolate parfait. The heat and bitterness of the coffee were a bit too strong for her.

I believe the master mentioned mixing in sugar and milk... Oh, my.

Adelheid followed the master's instructions and mixed in sugar and milk; just a spoonful of the former so it wouldn't be too sweet and lots of milk. After stirring it all together, the pitch black coffee turned light brown. Its bitter flavor also grew gentler.

This is quite good. I can feel myself warming up.

Adelheid was rather fond of this newfound combination. While the addition of the milk cooled the drink and weakened its aroma just a bit, it also made it easier to drink. It was the perfect way of warming up the body after eating such a cold chocolate parfait.

The princess let out a satisfied sigh from the one-two punch of the filling

chocolate parfait and the body-warming coffee. One didn't have to be particularly perceptive to tell that she was in high spirits.

"We're open once every seven days, so feel free to come again if you'd like. Oh, and I'll have to charge you next time."

The master could tell that the sad aura that once wrapped itself around the young lady was now completely gone. Seeing customers happy after eating his food never got old, especially when it came to young folks like her who still had long lives to live.

"I'll definitely come again," Adelheid answered with a smile.

She grabbed the hem of her dress and curtsied, then proceeded to leave the shop, once again finding herself in her room at the palace. The room was entirely unchanged, and yet Adelheid no longer looked at it as a prison.

Gold... I wonder how many gold coins I'll need?

Realistically, just how many gold coins would it cost to purchase such an amazing treat? The princess happily tossed herself onto her bed, away from others' eyes and thought about how she'd be able to have this amazing experience again in seven days. Likely a result of how happily full she was, a wave of exhaustion washed over her, and her breathing, evening out in sleep, filled the room.

For the first time in quite a while, Adelheid napped happily and dreamt. She dreamt of the day that she would get better and return to live here in the capital, all the while excited about the joyous time that awaited her in seven days.

Adelheid had no way of knowing that in seven days time, she would find herself struggling to pick one parfait out of the many on the restaurant's menu. She had no way of knowing about the many fateful meetings that awaited her at the Restaurant to Another World.

Chapter 9:

Cream Croquette

In one of the many small countries in the plains was a tiny village out in the middle of nowhere. Every day of the full moon, this village held an open market. It was there that a young boy was cheerfully humming to himself while cooking.

“Stew is delicious! Stew is the best!”

The boy was only about half as tall as the adults around him. He was barefoot with hair growing on the soles of his feet. The boy looked down into the pot simmering above the flames. While he looked like a child, nobody around him seemed to be particularly bothered by his presence.

The boy made sure the flames were just right so as to evenly cook the diced vegetables and meat in the large pot. This was the key to making a good stew. One had to boil the ingredients until they had reached the perfect level of tenderness so they would be at their most savory. He also had to be careful when removing the scum.

“All right! It’s all gone! And it’s boiling just right!”

After letting the pot stew for a time, the boy skimmed off the scum and dumped it on the ground. He then took a taste of the stew in order to confirm that the meat and vegetables had softened appropriately. He raised his voice.

“Pakke! Is the sauce ready?”

“Of course it is, Pikke!”

Approaching Pikke was a girl around his age holding a pot in both hands. She too was barefoot. The girl, Pakke, handed him a pot filled with white sauce.

“Perfect! Once we mix this in with some milk...”

Pikke poured the sauce and milk into his pot of stew and closed the lid. He then boiled it all together until the sauce settled.

“The knight stew is all done! Whew, this smells great!”

The boy removed the lid. The aroma coming from the warm stew was enough

to stop any passersby in their tracks.

“Here you go, Pakke! Have some! It’s as delicious as ever!”

“Thanks, Pikke! Mm, it’s scrumptious!”

The pair each enjoyed their servings of stew on their wooden plates. Overcome by the deliciousness of it all, they held hands and began to dance. They were incredible light on their feet, befitting “halflings.”

Halflings were a race of beings that only ever grew to be about the size of a human child. They were known for having soft, curly hair on the soles of their feet. By nature, they were curious beings who were almost always filled with energy. They enjoyed bustling spots and rarely stayed in one place for too long. Once a halfling became an adult, they would leave their family to travel the world, one day meeting a halfling they got along with, and eventually getting married. After that, the two of them would travel together, mate, give birth to a child, travel with them, and then finally watch as they too became an adult and left. Back to being a pair again, the married couple would travel together until they eventually left this world.

In order to survive on their journey through the world, halflings often had one special skill passed down to them from their parents. For example, this could be a bard’s singing abilities, some kind of interesting trick, the ability to steal from a passerby on the road without them noticing, a hunting skill that let them take advantage of their small bodies to trick prey into thinking they were weak, or even the ability to judge the value in objects. It was different for every family.

Pikke and Pakke were a young halfling couple that possessed the ability to cook. Most halfling cooks did not have restaurants of their own. Rather, they wandered from market to market, cooking the ingredients they acquired and selling them to customers on the street. Since they lacked the money to afford high-quality ingredients such as spices or sugars, all they had to rely on were their own cooking skills and knowledge.

And so Pikke and Pakke had one secret recipe, passed down to them to help support their life on the road. On the Eastern Continent, far away from the small country they were in, was the prosperous “Kingdom.” It was there that some twenty years ago, a merchant developed a revolutionary new sauce made

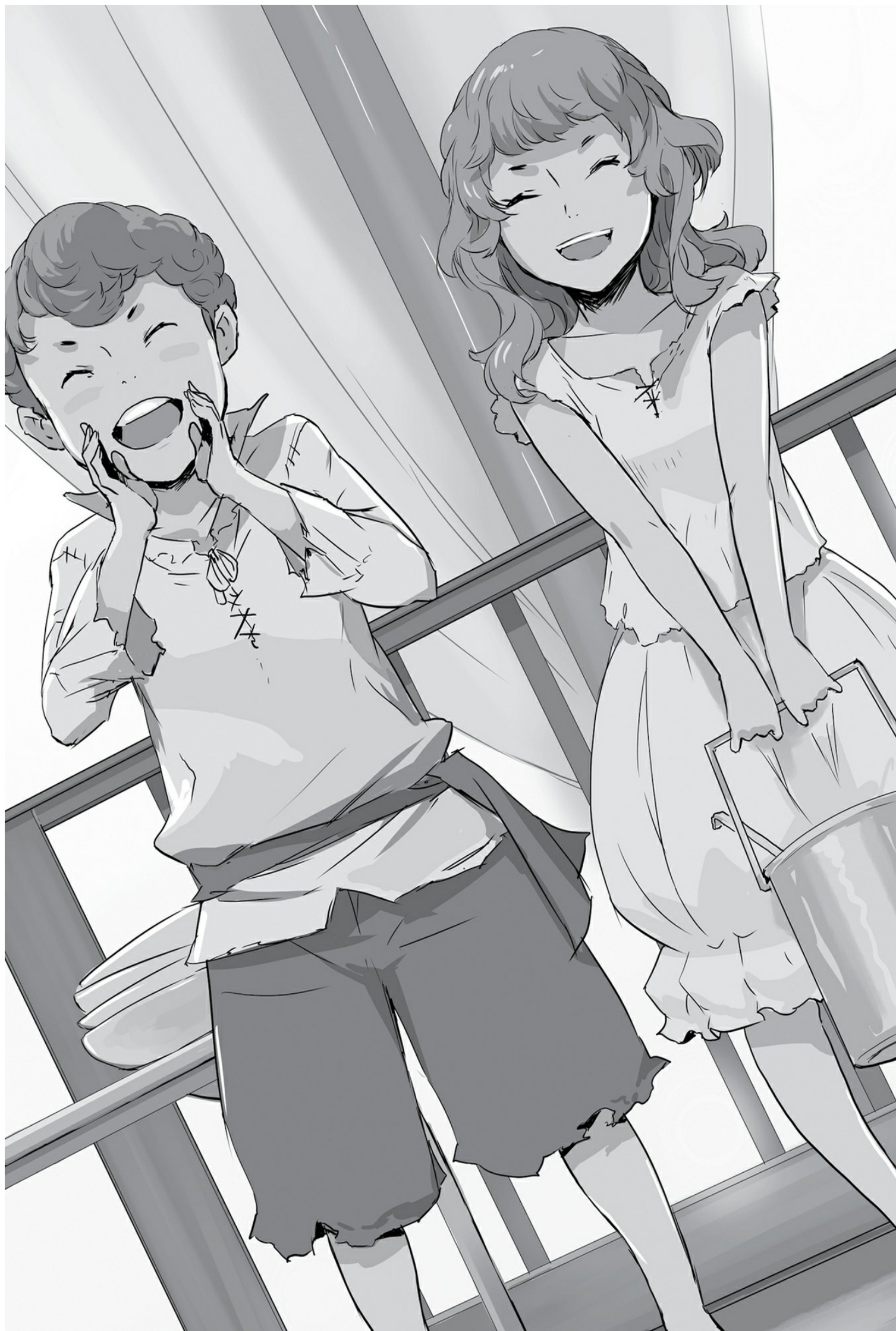
from cow milk and wheat that was so delicious, the then-prince and current king gave him the title of Knight.

Even humble farmers living in the sauce's country of origin would break it out for special occasions and festivals. It had spread throughout the nation with incredible speed. That said, it had yet to really reach small countries out on the edges of the world. For most of the citizens who lived on the fringes of these places, the only way they could try the sauce was by going to the capital where the king lived. As a result, this made Pikke and Pakke's stew a huge hit with locals.

"Come one, come all! We've got stew made with the ultra-famous knight sauce! That's right, the famous sauce from the Kingdom far, far away! First come, first served!"

"Just two copper coins for one bowl! It's super-duper delicious! Once we're sold out, that's all for today!"

The couple stood behind their stew, shouting into the crowds. It took everything they had not to drool because of the knight sauce's sweet aroma.



It was that same aroma combined with the inviting shouts that managed to pull shoppers toward them.

“Hey, what’s this white stew?”

From the large crowd came a middle-aged man who stepped forward to ask Pikke the question everyone was thinking.

“Hey there, sir! This is a stew made with knight sauce! You know, that legendary sauce created in a faraway country! How about it? Care to grab a bite?”

“You seem like a real man’s man, sir. And since you’re our first customer, we’ll treat you to an extra-large serving! How about it?”

The pair cheerfully smiled at the man as they continued to tempt him.

“You know what? Why the heck not. I’ll have a bowl.”

Almost pressured into it, the man handed Pakke two copper coins.

“That’s what I’m talking about! Here you go!”

“It’s hot, so be careful!”

The man’s face changed colors after sipping the stew. It was so delicious that he nearly cried out in shock. The large, soft, square pieces of greasy pork meat melted in his mouth. The warm and fluffy tubers, soaked in the savory stew, crumbled into pieces with each bite. The oranie had been boiled after being stir-fried with butter, lending it a delicious sweetness. Meanwhile, the sweet, orange karoots were properly soft after being put over fire. This stew was on another level from the average salted stuff that the man often made himself.

The man was enjoying this hot stew in the best of conditions on a frigid day. But even without that very specific set of conditions, this was an amazing feast.

“This is amazing! Another bowl, please!” The man immediately thrust his empty bowl and some more copper coins at Pikke.

“Thank ya very much! Eat as much as you’d like!”

“The stew goes great with bread, by the way! See, you dip the bread into the stew and let it soak in the juices! It gets nice and soft, and when you bite into it,

all the stew juices come flowing out into your mouth!” Pakke explained to the man and the crowd with a smile on her face, all the while pouring the man a new bowl of stew. She glanced at the stall next to them selling rye bread. Pakke could hear the sounds of people in the crowd gulping in anticipation.

“Hey, let me get a bowl!”

“Me too! Me too!”

“Hey, don’t forget about me!”

“C’mon, everyone! We’ve got delicious rye bread here! Goes great with that stew you got over there!”

“Seconds! I want seconds!”

Just like that, the large crowd of onlookers turned into a massive herd of customers, each ordering a bowl of stew for themselves. After getting their hands on some, they then went to the stall next door and bought a small piece of rye bread to go with their stew. The sounds of satisfied sighs filled the air, and some of the customers even came back for seconds.

“All right, folks! First come, first served! We’ve only made this much for today!”

“Once it’s gone, it’s gone! Grab some stew while you still can!”

By midday, the stew was all gone. Pikke and Pakke had acquired more than enough funds to get to the next town.

“Today’s the super fun Day of Satur!”

“Yay!”

Pikke and Pakke left their belongings at the inn and sang their out-of-tune song while walking through some woods on the outskirts of town. On occasion, they could hear the growling of beasts or monsters of some sort, but the couple paid them no mind. Most wild animals were cowards and wouldn’t dare to come near if they heard loud noises like the pair were making. Even if they did try to attack, few creatures could keep up with halflings who were running as fast as they could.

“What should I get today?”

“Um, um... We didn’t have any leftovers today, so knight sauce sounds great to me!”

“Good call! Let’s do it! We got money, too!”

The halfling couple happily chatted amongst themselves, for today was a good day. The man running the bread stall next to them ended up selling out at the same time they did. Grateful for their help, the man expressed his thanks to the pair. They even got some unexpected extra funds! As luck would have it, the first customer of the day was also the man who ran the town’s inn. He paid the pair 115 silver coins and seven copper coins to teach him the knight sauce recipe. Thanks to him, they were loaded.

This was the perfect day to visit the Restaurant to Another World.

“Just a little further! It’s the clearing right over there!” Pikke happily explained to Pakke.

In Pikke’s hand was a parchment with a variety of different things scribbled on it, including a mark that looked like a cat. This was the secret known amongst halflings; the mark that signified the “Door of Nekoya.”

Halfling maps were special. This race of people was rather curious and often acted on impulse, so they tended to travel far and wide across the world. Each of them had knowledge of a variety of different areas, so when halflings came across one another, they would take out their maps and exchange information. The unspoken rule was to be honest with each other.

No secrets.

As a race that survived by going on one journey to the next, knowing the land they were headed to was increasingly important. One well-known landmark of sorts was the “Door of Nekoya.”

Once every seven days, on the Day of Satur, black doors with cat signs on them appeared all over the world. This door was linked to “Nekoya,” a Restaurant to Another World. It was there that they could eat foods from a world not their own.

The meals one could find at the Restaurant to Another World were extremely strange but amazingly delicious. It was recommended that on the Day of Satur, should a black door be nearby, one should go to grab a scrumptious bite. Pikke and Pakke were both very familiar with the door and the restaurant that existed beyond it. It only made sense that two halflings who were gifted cooks would be that much more interested in anything cooking-related than your average person. They were also known for being quite the gourmands in general.

Both of them had visited the restaurant multiple times while they were still traveling with their respective families. That's why the two of them made it a point to drop in on the Day of Satur if there was a door in the area.

"Annnnd, we're here! Awesome, it's there!" said Pakke.

"Annnnd, nobody else is here!" said Pikke.

After spotting the black door in the center of the forest, just off the beaten path, the two halflings searched the area to make sure nobody else was near.

The Door of Nekoya could only be used once on a given Day of Satur, and as such, people who lived near a door would often try to keep it to themselves. One famous example of this amongst the halflings were the lizardmen. They had an altar where the door appeared and would more than likely attack anybody from outside the tribe who tried to use it. There was also another customer who appeared late at night. She was known among halflings as the "Midnight Mistress" and wore a bright red dress whenever she popped up. Every time she visited the restaurant, the woman would order beef stew, the most expensive item on the menu. It was more than likely that if anybody ever got near the door she used, they'd be burned to ashes.

Thus, the halflings considered it good manners to search the area around a Door of Nekoya before using it.

"Doesn't seem like anybody's used it for a while."

"Then let's go!" cried Pikke.

"Yup, yup!" said Pakke.

After confirming that nobody had been near the door any time recently, the halflings held hands. As Pikke pushed open the door, the familiar sound of

ringing bells filled the air.

“Welcome! Oho, well if it isn’t Pikke and Pakke! It’s been a while.” The master took a moment to look away from the busy interior of the restaurant and greet the couple.

“Sure has! When was the last time we dropped in?”

“Um, I think it was around the end of summer!”

The pair, having been to the restaurant multiple times, smiled and responded. The small people that looked like children to the master were in fact full-grown halfling adults. Because the race didn’t live in any one place, they weren’t “regulars” who could visit the restaurant every week. He got plenty of halfling customers who just happened to be in the vicinity of a door, but he rarely saw the same people twice.

“More importantly, could you give us a menu, sir?”

“Oh, oh! And what’s today’s daily special?”

“All right, all right,” the master said. “Hold on just a second. Let’s see, today’s daily special is cream croquette.” The master couldn’t help but smile at the pair, as excitable as always.

“Cream croquette?!”

“That’s the one with the knight sauce and the fried bread crumbs!”

Maybe it was fated. The halflings turned to each other and smiled.

“Can we get two orders of cream croquettes to start with, sir? Oh, and I’d like some rice, too!”

“I’ll have bread! Oh, oh, and can you bring a menu with you, too? We’re gonna eat a whole bunch today!”

Pikke and Pakke placed their orders before even sitting down, eventually finding a spot and waving their legs excitedly from atop their chairs.

“Yup, you got it! You small people are always bundles of energy, eh?” The master once again chuckled to himself before retreating to the back to start frying the croquettes.

“Wow, there are all sorts of people here today, Pikke!”

“You’re right! Wowee, Pakke!”

As the two halflings waited for their food, they began to people-watch. The Restaurant to Another World was packed with a variety of different races that day. There was a young woman enthusiastically eating a plate of minced meat cutlet covered in sauce. Elsewhere, another young woman in beautiful clothes happily enjoyed an ice-cold, sweet “parfait.” Meanwhile, a young man who looked like some sort of merchant was furiously scribbling down notes as he devoured a dish of spaghetti Neapolitan.

Next to him was a lizardman eating “omelet rice.” The creature wore a blank expression on its face, making it impossible to tell what it was thinking. Nearby was an elven man with a thin, magic sword sheathed at his waist. He was indulging in a plate of “natto spaghetti” made with fermented beans of some kind. Pikke had yet to give this menu item a try.

There was even a table of about 100 tiny people wearing the same clothes, all about the size of the palm of Pikke’s hand, eating a single plate of “pancakes.” It was very rare to see this many different races gathered together in one spot in their world, but the food at this restaurant broke down the barriers between them all. Everyone came here with the same goal and purpose: to eat delicious food. The Restaurant to Another World truly was a special place.

“This is so fun, Pikke!”

“You’re right! I bet we’d never grow tired of coming here every day if we could, Pakke!” The two continued their conversation as the master approached their table with food in hand.

“Here you are, folks. Two orders of cream croquettes.”

The master set down two hot plates. There were fresh greens, small red marmetts, and three light brown cream croquettes on each.

“Wowee!”

“Wowee!”

The two raised their voices in unison. Both halflings excitedly grabbed their

utensils, looking forward to their first meal of the day. Their knives cut through the croquettes with great ease and an ever-so-satisfying sound. From the cut oozed white knight sauce mixed with some sort of red substance. The aroma from the sauce caused the halflings' nostrils to flare. Unable to hold themselves back any longer, they both took bites of their respective croquettes.

A variety of flavors exploded in their mouths, the first of which was the knight sauce's unique, sweet and rich flavor. However, mixed in with that was the flavor of the sea. It wasn't fish meat but something else entirely.

"Mm!"

"Mm!"

Pikke and Pakke once again raised their voices simultaneously, letting the steam from the food in their mouths escape as they munched. They both swallowed, enjoying the sweet knight sauce that flowed forth with each bite into the croquette alongside the other ingredients' savory quality.

"This is super-duper delish!" said Pikke.

"I can taste the ocean!" Pakke said. The two shared their thoughts on the bites they each took. The Restaurant to Another World had knocked it out of the park yet again.

"Let's see..." Pakke said. "I'm gonna try this one next!"

"Then I'm trying this one!"

The halflings each reached for a different cream croquette, almost as if they'd planned it ahead of time.

The rice and bread mixed well with the rich flavor of the cream croquettes, producing an altogether different experience than that of the first one they devoured. They then took their time patiently explaining the innards of their respective croquettes to each other. That kind of patience was a rare virtue for halflings.

"This one is filled with smoked meat and mushrooms!" Pikke's cream croquette was just as described. Inside of it was stir-fried, finely seasoned and flavored smoked meat. This meat had its fat stripped from it and was soaked in

knight sauce. Meanwhile, the thinly sliced mushrooms were salted just right so as to carefully balance the sweetness of the sauce. They were dried beforehand, which allowed them to soak in the flavors of the meat and the sweetness of the knight sauce, producing an even more refined flavor with each bite. It was that cream mixed with the flavors of the smoked meat and mushrooms that spread throughout the mouth. The rice went well with the texture of the meat.

“This one has all kinds of yellow bits in it! It’s sweet!”

Meanwhile, Pakke’s croquette was filled with yellow vegetables of some kind. The small bits of yellow vegetables were incredibly sweet, almost like a fruit. She’d never seen anything like it before. Each bite into the yellow bits produced a sweet flavor that combined with the knight sauce’s own unique sweetness. It was so overwhelming that one couldn’t be faulted for thinking they were eating some kind of dessert. The sweet, otherworldly bread topped with butter made for an excellent side dish.

“Wow, cool! Let me have a bite! Whoa, it’s soooooo sweet and delish!”

“Then let me try yours! Wow! The meat tastes amazing!”

Pikke and Pakke each took bites out of the other’s cream croquettes, spelling the end of this first dish.

“Wowee, that was delicious! What should we have next?”

“Hm, let’s see...”

The two halflings mashed their faces together and looked down at the menu. They wanted more. While they might have only been as large as human children, the couple could eat many times more than most adults. Their meal had only just begun.

“That sure was scrumptious, Pikke.”

“Yup, yup! It’s been so long since the last time that I think I might’ve eaten too much!”

In front of the two were the remains of enough food for approximately 10

people. By the time they left the restaurant (though not before ordering sandwiches to go for the next day's lunch), it had grown dark. The couple wore huge smiles on their faces.

"Let's go home!"

"Sounds good! Can't wait to sleep on a nice, soft bed!"

The halflings exchanged words and hurried down the path home.

"Where should we go next, Pikke?"

"Let's see... That one cream croquette that tasted like the ocean was really good! I think I wanna go to the sea, Pakke!"

And just like that, the halflings decided the next destination on their journey.

"Oh, good idea! Then let's grab a boat! I've never been on a big one before!"

"Me neither! That's a super good idea! Let's do it!"

The happy halfling couple chatted amongst themselves, their path forward lit by the full moon in the sky.

Chapter 10:

Okonomiyaki The other world consisted of two continents: the Eastern Continent and the Western Continent.

The Western Continent was a series of never-ending fields and forests. Unlike the Eastern Continent, where the lost Great Kingdom unified all the nations into one, the countries of the Western Continent were still very much independent of one another.

One of those very countries was the Mountain Nation. Half of the country was surrounded by mountains, as one might imagine. Souemon worked as a bodyguard there. He had begun frequenting the Restaurant to Another World five years earlier.

At the time, Souemon found himself befriending a certain halfling. The small man traveled far and wide across the Western Continent, creating songs and reciting poems to passersby and folks in villages for money. This halfling, who referred to himself as a bard, was a bit skeevy, almost rat-like in appearance.

The two men got along well, and Souemon even invited the smaller man to his home as a guest. That was when the halfling told him the location of a magical door connected to a Restaurant to Another World, located near the capital of the Mountain Nation. Souemon could barely believe the words he heard. If anything, he had great reason not to. However, as a samurai of the Mountain Nation, he felt he should at least visit the place on the day the halfling told him to, if only to confirm the story one way or the other.

That was when he came face to face with it. That was when he discovered the Restaurant to Another World and its unbelievable food...as well as the customer he would butt heads with for years to come.

One evening...

Like always, the bell on Nekoya's door rang as Souemon walked in.

Souemon immediately recognized the man's presence as a blast of salty air hit

him upon entering the restaurant. *The same time again?* he thought. *Curses!*

He let out a sigh. "You're here again, I see. Diviner of the Ocean Nation."

Sitting there as usual was a face that Souemon had grown very accustomed to seeing. The man's skin was as pale as snow, almost as though he had never once left his house, despite coming from the Ocean Nation where avoiding a tan was considered impossible. His face was thin, masking his age. The person in front of Souemon was a regular of the restaurant and one that he did not get along with.

"Well, well," the man said. "If it isn't the sword-swinging ape... Oh, my apologies. I meant samurai of the Mountain Nation."

This fox-like man was named Doushun, and he was a diviner in the Ocean Nation's palace. He glared sharply at Souemon, returning his greeting with venom. His words greatly annoyed the samurai, but it was a rule not to draw swords in the Restaurant to Another World, so he decided to battle with words instead.

"Hmph! You're as tactless as ever. Why would you ever come here the same hour as I?"

"That's my question, too. As a palace diviner, I am quite busy. You're nothing but a court guard. Should you not be able to come here whenever you want?"

Doushun shrugged, once again spitting hot fire in Souemon's direction. The air between the men was poisonous. Since the magic doors appeared wherever they felt like, the restaurant would occasionally get customers that simply did not get along well. For example, the elves and the dwarves, the knights and the mages, or citizens of the Kingdom and citizens of the Empire.

Souemon and Doushun were the perfect example of this little problem.

The Ocean Nation had put resources into academics and the divine arts so as to make crossing the ocean a safer process. This was so that they could proceed to do trade with the eastern regions facing the ocean, especially now that they were at peace. Meanwhile, the Mountain Nation was known for its swordplay, a skill developed long ago in order to defend its citizens from demons and monsters as well as cut through mountains. The two countries were famous

throughout the Western Continent for having spectacularly bad relations. It only made sense that these two neighboring countries, with their completely different priorities and values, didn't get along well. It certainly didn't help that they were about equal in might.

Unfortunately for Souemon, Doushun had also learned of a door somewhere in the Ocean Nation from a halfling friend. And so every seven days without fail, the two men found themselves bumping into each other at the Restaurant to Another World. As a result of their jobs, they generally ended up coming in at the same time, just around dusk. This meant that these two regulars were often seen together as a pair.

Since they got along so poorly, the problem would be solved if one of them simply delayed their arrival by a half hour or so, but they both considered that to be losing to the other. This was how it had to be.

The master of the restaurant suddenly emerged from the kitchen and greeted the two sneering men with a smile. "Welcome, you two. Take a seat wherever you'd like."

"Mm, thank you."

"That I will."

After returning his greeting, the two men sat down at the same table in the back of the restaurant near the kitchen. There were a handful of other customers already inside; some easterners and other races. The pair briefly glared at one another before turning away and calling for the master. They didn't even have to look at the menu.

"Master, I'm ready to order."

"Master, might I place my order?"

Their orders were already set in stone. In the five years since the two became customers, they'd tried all sorts of dishes. Each was delicious in its own way, but these were the dishes the men settled on.

"Aye. The usual?"

Both men nodded.

“Mmhm. I’ll have pork okonomiyaki with lots of sauce.”

“I’ll take an order of okonomiyaki. Seafood, please. And as much dried bonito as it can handle.”

Both men believed this dish most capable of bringing out the deliciousness of “sauce” and “dried bonito,” two of the restaurant’s unique, amazing condiments.

“You got it. I’ll be right back.” The master returned to the kitchen.

“Seafood as usual, eh? Shouldn’t you be tired of it already? You are from the Ocean Nation, are you not?”

“And what of you? Beast meat should be common to someone from the Mountain Nation. Am I wrong?”

After commenting on each other’s orders, they proceeded to indulge in small talk while partaking in the restaurant’s famous water.

“So the Ocean Nation plans on increasing its business deals with the Empire, then?”

“I see. Dwarf swordsmithing, you say?”

Of course, nothing about their talk was small. They were gathering information about their respective nations. There were times when this could even lead to a decent payout later. The two men sat together despite not getting along in order to use each other.

Being a diviner meant being present in the Ocean Nation’s palace, which also meant having relationships with merchants and nobles alike. On the other hand, being an accomplished samurai who even became a guard of the emperor himself meant having a wide web of connections and relationships. The two men led extremely different lives, which was why they found their respective stories so very fresh and even useful.

However, just like that, their conversation came to an end.

“Here you are, gentlemen. Okonomiyaki.” The master brought out two black metal plates at the same time and placed them down in front of the pair.

“Ooh, it’s finally here!”

“I’ve been waiting for this!”

The aroma coming from the food on the hot metal dishes made Souemon and Doushun smile with glee. The fresh okonomiyaki was served on the black metal plates to keep it from getting cold. They could hear the faint sizzling noises coming from it.

The okonomiyaki was made from a mix of flour, green cabbage, yams, and a slew of other ingredients fried together. On top of the bright yellow and green vegetables was a wealth of black sauce, followed by a grid-like pattern drawn with mayonnaise. At first glance, there appeared to be wood shavings of some sort dancing across the top of the okonomiyaki, except they smelled of the sea.

Sprinkled atop of that, almost as if to add color to the dish, were thick pieces of green seaweed. All of these ingredients combined to make the okonomiyaki surprisingly colorful. However, its aroma was nothing to sneeze at. The sauce dripped off of the okonomiyaki and onto the sizzling hot metal plate, sending up an aroma that sent a shock through Souemon and Doushun’s stomachs.

“Mm. I believe it’s time to eat,” Souemon said.

“Thank you for the food,” said Doushun.

Souemon and Doushun, both unable to resist the urge to dig in any longer, grabbed their chopsticks and began to eat nearly simultaneously. The wooden utensils cut through the soft, blanket-like okonomiyaki with ease. From the opening in the cut, the black sauce dripped down to the plate and sizzled, sending up a faint burnt smell. Souemon brought a piece of okonomiyaki to his mouth, all the while enjoying the smell coming from the dish.

It was hot.

Heat was the very first thing he felt. With the metal plate there to maintain the food’s hotness, the okonomiyaki was still piping hot.

“Ho, ho, I see you Mountain Nation types still eat like slobs!” Doushun sneered.

Souemon ignored Doushun’s words and opened his mouth to let the heat out.

After releasing the heat, all that remained was the aroma of the burnt sauce

and sourness. Once the okonomiyaki was cool enough for him to chew, he could finally enjoy crunching into the crispy outer layer and fluffy cabbage-filled interior.

All of these flavors melded together in his mouth. From the seaweed pieces came the aroma of the sea, and from the woodchip-looking dried bonito, the savoriness of fish.

The fatty pork had a gentle flavor to it not entirely unlike that of lion meat, though it lacked the gamey quality of the latter. The flavor of the oil-drenched flour mixed tightly with the sweet cabbage, further enhanced by the rich taste of the eggs and spicy red sauce. Enveloping all of that was the sweet and sour, savory-yet-gentle flavor of the mayonnaise.

This was a dish that took numerous flavors of the mountains and oceans, and combined them into one fine meal. This was the reason why Souemon was willing to deal with the intense initial heat of the first bite every time; he wanted to experience all these flavors at once. After sampling a variety of foods at the restaurant, this was the one he stumbled upon. Since that fateful day, it was all he ever ordered. Souemon was nowhere close to getting tired of it.

“Can you not be a bit more elegant during meal time if nothing else?”

Doushun shook his head in disbelief and cut a small piece from his okonomiyaki. He blew on it gently before placing it in his mouth.

“Mmph. As delicious as ever. There’s not a single trace of the smell of fish. Not only has the seafood been processed beautifully, these bonito flakes are simply delightful.”

Doushun found himself nodding his head in satisfaction as he expressed his opinions of the tiny, soft shripe and the savory krakeen. He understood that his favorite part of the dish, the bonito flakes, were made using some kind of fish element, but he hadn’t the slightest idea of how that became the small, delicious flakes that sat in front of him. He felt that if he were ever able to crack the code and found his own ocean country, its food culture would be unbeatable.

Which is why Doushun made it a point to order the same dish every single time he visited. That said, he couldn’t deny that he also ate it because it was

positively delicious.

After a brief period of time, both men finished their meals.

“Master, I’d like seconds.”

“Master, could you get me another dish?”

They placed their orders simultaneously.

“Aye, you got it. Okonomiyaki for the both of you, right? What kind?” the master asked his regulars, knowing full well what their answers would be.

“I will have seafood,” announced Souemon.

“I will have pork,” said Doushun.

As usual, the two men who were more alike than they’d ever care to admit looked away from each other as they placed their orders. After seeing the other man so thoroughly enjoy their okonomiyaki, they ended up wanting some for themselves. This happened every single time they sat together.

After finishing his meal, Souemon returned to the outskirts of town, letting out a sigh laced with the aroma of sauce. If he had a single complaint about the restaurant, it was that he had to bump into that accursed man every time he visited.

“How unfortunate. Nekoya would be that much better if that damned diviner never showed up again.” Souemon let the words slip from his mouth as if he were trying to cover for the fact that he actually enjoyed their earlier back and forth.

“Time to get to work again tomorrow!”

He returned to his everyday life, all the while excitedly waiting for the next seven days to pass...and thinking about his next confrontation with that man.

Chapter 11:

Pound Cake

Saturday morning.

After preparing the beef stew and having a light breakfast, the master took a brief moment to relax in the kitchen. He could have returned to his home on the third floor, but every week on Saturday at around this time, he got a visitor. It wouldn't be long before his guest arrived.

"Yo, top of the morning," a voice called. "I've got the goods."

From the loading elevator in the kitchen came a thin man with a wagon in tow.

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate it," the master replied, returning the greeting with a certain level of familiarity. The visitor was a friend of his that he'd known since elementary school. It made sense that they were casual with one another.

"It's no biggie. We're open on Saturdays anyway, so it's not like I'm doing anything crazy. Plus, I get paid." The man went to the giant refrigerator and began to unload into it cakes and treats that he had made himself.

On the first floor of Nekoya's building was a cake shop called the Flying Puppy. Its sign was, appropriately enough, that of a puppy with wings. This man inherited the shop from his father, a patissier. He was the master's childhood friend. The two middle-aged men were the same age, though the patissier already had two children of his own. The Flying Puppy's patissier was aware of Nekoya's secret business on Saturdays. When the two men were still elementary school kids, there were times when the patissier's parents were too busy to make dinner, so they'd give him money to eat at Nekoya. The previous master treated the boy just as he did his own grandson, and so he naturally came to know the restaurant's secret.

As far as the patissier was concerned, he owed Nekoya. When he was in college, he had a bike accident. When injuries from the crash left him paralyzed from the waist down, the previous master gave him a somewhat suspicious

“otherworldly elixir.” It was this medicine that saved him. Doctors called it a miraculous recovery. Truth be told, it really was something of a miracle.

And so after he finished his training as a patissier, he inherited his parent’s shop, the very same one in Nekoya’s building. He cooperated with the master as much as was possible. The patissier sold his goods to Western Cuisine Nekoya at wholesale prices, and more than half of the restaurant’s dessert items came from him.

“That’s everything! Whew, I’m starting to feel my age a bit. Hahaha. Oh, before I forget. Take this.”

The patissier finished putting the cakes that needed to be kept cold in the fridge and the ones that needed to be kept warm into warm storage. He then grabbed a box from his wagon and handed it to the master.

“The heck is this? Some kinda cake?”

The master tilted his head at the long box that had a silhouette of the Flying Puppy’s trademark winged canine on it. The sturdy gift box was heavier than it looked. From the inside, the master could detect the faint aroma of brandy. Whatever was in here used quite a bit of it. While there were cakes at the Flying Puppy that were made with some measure of alcohol, the master wasn’t familiar with any that were this obvious.

“It’s one of our prizes. You know how if you buy a hundred items from us, you get one whole cake of your choosing for free, right?” The patissier smiled as he explained the system to his friend.

At the Flying Puppy, he had a stamp system in which one piece of cake got the customer one stamp. Collect twenty stamps and a visitor got a free piece of cake. Collect a hundred and they got a whole cake. The master heard that this was particularly popular with working women in the neighborhood.

“A hundred pieces?” the master asked, confused. “Wait, don’t tell me it’s her.”

Hearing his friend’s words, the master immediately recalled the otherworldly customer in her early twenties who had undoubtedly eaten some hundred pieces of cake. She was one of his regulars.

“Yeah, her! You told me about her before, remember? She’s been showing up at your place every week for the past year, and she always orders two pieces of my pound cake! I believe you described her as a cutie. Could you get that to her? I know they don’t got fridges over there, so I made it so that it could be stored warm for at least a few weeks. Just don’t forget to tell her to eat it as soon as she opens it!”

“You got it. I’ll make sure to get it to her when she swings by.” The master agreed to his friend’s request and took the box from him. Now that he thought about it, last week she’d had something of a troubled look on her face. Something unfortunate might have happened to her. This could be the perfect pick-me-up.

Once every week was the day of trials.

“And so the day is upon me yet again...”

In the corner of the training ground appeared a black door with a picture of a cat on it. It was that very door that the high priestess of the Lord of Light, Celestine, cast her blue eyes upon, her beautiful blonde hair gently swaying behind her. She wore a troubled expression on her face.

This training ground was created specifically for the high priestess herself. Celestine was the only one with permission to enter this space. It took years to become a high priest or priestess, with most only reaching that position somewhere between their forties and fifties. Celestine, however, was granted the title at the incredibly young age of twenty. At the age of twenty-one, His Grace personally put her in charge of this monastery. Thus, the only people who knew this training ground’s secret were the previous head who was now in retirement and Celestine herself.

“Today. Today’s the day...” The young high priestess steadied herself and stood in front of the door.

Just looking at it was enough to make her mouth water, but she did her best to try and compose herself. Celestine’s “year of acceptance” was over. At this rate, she would be put face to face with her own weakness.

The Lord of Light that Celestine believed in was one that heavily prioritized self-control. Priests and priestesses were held to a higher standard than that of the average believer. This was especially the case for high priests and priestesses who would go on to lead the church itself, and so after a “year of acceptance,” they were to practice severe self-control going forward.

The Lord of Light and his loyal servant, His Grace and one of the legendary four heroes, preached to their followers that was easy enough to not be tempted by something one did not know existed. However, that could hardly be considered defeating one’s desires and gaining selfless virtue. The only true way to ascend to that level was to understand why such desires were so tempting and then train in true self-control.

The “year of acceptance” was a practice born from that idea. Alcohol, tobacco, sweets, cosmetics... It wasn’t just about matters of the heart or purity, it was also about the many luxury items in the world. And so for a full year, followers of the Lord of Light who wished to attain the high status of priest or priestess were allowed to indulge in all of these things as much as they so desired. After that year was over, they would then train to cut themselves off from all of those desires.

It went without saying that failure was not a rare thing. It was believed that self-control was something that had to come from within. And so, high priests and priestesses were capable of getting their hands on as many luxury goods as they wanted, which made cutting them out all the more difficult. As a result, the church believed that it was all right for those who became high priests or priestesses to have one or two things that they dabbled in. It was normal. Even His Grace, one of the four heroes who had saved the world from the dark lord decades ago, would occasionally enjoy a good smoke of his pipe. These things made people human.

Which was why Celestine was so odd. As the church required, she went through her “year of acceptance,” and on the following day, cut back on all of her desires. This happened some two years ago. Since then, she had been a steel fortress of self-control. It was this determination of spirit and her own talent that got her promoted to the position of high priestess at such a young age. Her exploits only grew, as one year ago during the great Lich Hunt, she

performed admirably despite being the youngest high priestess on the field. This led to her being entrusted with an entire monastery all her own.

Which is how she ended up standing in front of this black door.

This is no good. No good at all.

Celestine slowly staggered her way to the door. Just beyond it was an entire world of luxuries and magical items she would never be able to acquire in her world. When her precursor stepped down, Celestine learned of this door's existence. She stepped beyond it and found herself entranced by what she found. That was one year ago... With her second "year of acceptance" now finished, Celestine found herself unable to shed her desires.

Frustrated with herself, she slowly opened the door and was met with the ringing of bells; the sound of defeat.

"Welcome!"

Celestine quietly entered the restaurant only to be met with the smiling face of the middle-aged master. To her, he looked more like a demon attempting to lure her into depravity.

I-It's not too late...

Indeed. She could just turn around and leave. Celestine was nothing like the common folk hungrily indulging themselves in the food of this restaurant. Since she was a high priestess of the great Lord of Light, she needed to practice self-control! She internally repeated these words to herself and attempted to make her exit...

That is, until the demon—no, the master—shattered those plans.

"Will you be getting pound cake again? Oh, by the way, today's pound cake is rum raisin!"

And just like that, Celestine's legs stopped moving.

Rum raisin?!

Including the first time she visited this restaurant, Celestine had only had the pleasure of tasting that most ephemeral of flavors but three times. The thought alone was enough to revive the memories of that incredible experience on her

tongue, and she quickly swallowed the saliva building in her mouth.

“So what’ll it be?”

“I-I’ll have some!”

“Aye! Coming right up!”

The master smiled back at her. His truly was the smile of a demon of temptation. Caught in the throes of defeat, Celestine took a seat at the nearest table.

I lost... I’m such a fool!

She could see the faces of her fellow high priests and priestesses flash by in her mind. Despite having the power that one possessed in such a position, Celestine’s elders were incapable of entirely cutting themselves off from temptation. Somewhere in her heart, she had always looked down on them for it. She could feel the wave of guilt washing over her. Celestine was a steel fortress of self-control? What a joke. She was no different than her colleagues; just as weak of heart as the rest of them.

A-And what’s with this place, anyway?! If they just offered the same flavor every single time, I’d have grown tired of it by now!

Every time Celestine visited this restaurant, the flavor of its seductive “pound cake” was different. Every single time.

On one visit, Celestine found herself face to face with a type of pound cake filled with dried fruits. A different time, she indulged in one filled with slightly bitter but incredibly sweet “chocolate” of some sort. She encountered a pound cake with some kind of sweet, green stuff with roasted beans. Then there was the time when the pound cake had a yellow filling that tasted like egg... Every time she came here, the pound cake she ate was completely different. She only ever encountered the same flavor once every few months at the very most.

And then there were the special types, like the yellow “Halloween Pound Cake,” which had the sweet flavor of vegetables, and the “Hinamatsuri Special,” which featured pink, yellow, and green layers. She only saw each of these once throughout the year. This, combined with the fact that the restaurant only appeared once every seven days, made the whole thing that much harder to

give up.

And what's the big idea, showing up today and offering rum raisin of all things, just after my "year of acceptance" wrapped up?! That's not fair!

There was no way that someone of the other world could possibly know of her training, but Celestine didn't care. She needed to take out her frustrations. Just the thought of the rum raisin treat made her mouth water again. All the different pound cakes of the other world tasted amazing, but the rum raisin was on a different level altogether. It was so good that the first time she ate it, she instinctively thought to herself that it was the food of the Gods. So on those rare days that the master was serving rum raisin, she ate more than usual.

Why isn't it ready yet?

Thinking about the rum raisin pound cake in her future made Celestine grow impatient. It was so hard just waiting, but finally the time had arrived.

"Here you are. One pound cake and black tea set."

"Th-thank you!" Celestine flashed the master a smile.

The sight of the pound cake with white fluff sprinkled atop was enough to force a smile out of her.

"I'll bring out seconds as soon as you want." The master saw right through her. He knew that she'd order another one. He quickly left her table to deal with the other customers.

"Oh, Lord of Light who watches over all of us from the heavens. I thank you for this blessing of food." After praying, Celestine took her silver fork in hand and began to eat.

"Oh..."

It had been months since she last experienced the joy that was rum raisin pound cake, so she couldn't help but make noises as she bit into it. That's just how mouthwatering it was. There was something about its moist sweetness and soft texture. While it resembled bread, it really was something else entirely. She could sense the light traces of alcohol spread throughout her mouth. The dried grapes exploded on her tongue, having absorbed the sweet alcohol. That

wasn't all, however. The white, sweet fluffy stuff on top fused with the flavor of the dried grapes to create a sweetness that reminded her of any number of confectionaries.

The yellow dough, dried black grapes, and the white fluffy stuff were a power team. They were each just sweet enough, with their different layers melting together in her mouth and producing something entirely new. Celestine was intoxicated by this tremendous explosion of flavor. All the guilt and shame she had for being incapable of resisting her temptations melted away along with the pound cake in her mouth.

Once Celestine took that first bite, there was no turning back. She would have to proceed forward in her culinary journey. Her hand kept moving, and soon enough, the pound cake was gone from this world. Rest in peace.

"Mm... Excuse me, but can I have another serving of pound cake, please?"

Celestine put a single spoonful of sugar into the uniquely bitter black "tea" and cleansed her palate before ordering a second helping of pound cake. Anybody familiar with Celestine would be shocked by how far removed she was from her usual demure self. They'd be further stunned after learning that she was acting this way because of sweets, of all things.

Truth be told, Celestine wasn't particularly fond of sweets or confectionaries. When she underwent her "year of acceptance" between the ages of eighteen and nineteen, she ate sweets drowning in sugar and honey almost every day. Yet when it was all said and done, she didn't feel the urge to keep eating more. Celestine figured that she simply wasn't all that fond of them.

She was wrong. The young high priestess was forced to confront the truth after coming into contact with the demonic otherworldly food known as pound cake. It wasn't that Celestine hated sweets, it was simply that she never knew what true sweets tasted like. She also learned that her own self-control and willpower weren't enough to resist its seductive nature.

It was easy enough to not be tempted by something one did not know existed. These words rang truer than ever for Celestine. After learning of this place, she used the "year of acceptance" as an excuse to be a customer every time the door appeared. Seven days ago, she fell into despair when she realized

a full year had passed since she became a regular at Nekoya. And so today, for the first time in her life, she lost to her own desires.

“Ugh....” she groaned.

Celestine finished off the final piece of pound cake, her second plate of the day, and ultimately felt like a fool. She regretted everything. She was unable to control herself. She did it. Those feelings washed over her.

I-I'll just make sure not to come next time...

Celestine attempted to convince herself that it would all be okay as she placed down several silver coins on the table. She had no way of knowing that when she stood up to exit, she would receive a sucker punch right to the gut.

“Oh, are you already headed out? Wait just a second...” Noticing Celestine ready to leave, the master retreated to the kitchen in a hurry.

He came out holding something in his hands.

“Here, this is for you. Thank you so much for always stopping by. This is just a token of our gratitude.”

The master had a long, thin box in his hands with the picture of a winged puppy on it.

“What is this?” Celestine dreaded the answer, though somewhere deep inside, she was also excited. The master’s grin deepened as if he could see into her innermost thoughts.

“It’s a special brandy pound cake that we don’t usually have for sale. It’s a little heavier on the alcohol than the standard rum raisin cake you seem to enjoy so much. I’m sure you’ll love it.”

His words were enough to drive Celestine into a spiral of despair.

“B-brandy pound cake...?”

These words in that order were entirely unfamiliar to her, but the collective sound they made, combined with the master’s explanation, were enough to tell Celestine everything she needed to know. This thing was dangerous. If she ate it, there would be no turning back. She’d be making a pact with the devil.

I've never had this before... But since I like rum raisin, I'll surely love this...

The master's words stirred something inside of her. She could literally feel the insides of her stomach moving. She wanted to try it. She *had* to try it. That's all she could think to herself.

"If you keep it somewhere dark and cool, it should stay good for up to twenty days. Though he did say that if you open it up, make sure to eat it immediately. Hope you can enjoy it with a friend or something!"

I have to say no. I have to say no.

And yet Celestine took the box from his hands nonetheless. She couldn't help herself.

"Thank you very much." The high priestess managed to muster a smile and offer words of gratitude.

"You're very welcome. Take care!"

"Yes, see you again soon..."

Celestine finally managed to leave the restaurant, certain that she'd come again.

The next day, she broke the seal on the cake box. Celestine brought the brandy pound cake to her mouth with a certain level of resolve. The master had said it utilized stronger alcohol than the rum raisin. The moment she took a bite, everything became clear. There was no more running away for her. It was time for Celestine to make her move.

"Lady Celestine! Wh-what is this?! What type of alcohol is this?!"

The first person she visited was a nun on the path to become a high priestess named Carlotta. Celestine had set her eyes on her some time ago. Carlotta was known to have a love for alcohol that rivaled even the dwarves. The food itself was incredible, but even more stunning was the unknown alcohol used in its creation. Its fragrance was tremendous. Carlotta wanted to drink the mysterious liquor.

"It's... bitter. But sweet? Delicious," whispered the half-elf Anna as she focused intently on eating the cake in front of her. A changeling, Anna had a

long life span and tremendous magical powers. Having lived with the church since shortly after birth, this was a first for her. The fragrant cake in front of her initially tasted bitter, but then that only served to strengthen the sweetness that came after. This was a tremendous discovery for Anna, raised at the Monastery of Light.

“Lady Celestine... This is incredibly delicious. I’ve had confectionaries in the Kingdom, but nothing like this. Who made this? Where are they?”

Anna wasn’t the only one who didn’t recognize the cake. Julianne, born of noble blood in the Kingdom, had experienced all the luxuries that were available in the capital city. If they didn’t recognize this confection, it was entirely likely that nobody on the Eastern Continent or the Western Continent would recognize it. Celestine’s description of it as a “special gift” was apt.

Nobody had a clue who could make something like it.

Celestine had decided to share her special gift with the three elites of her monastery. Once they were gathered together, she presented them with the long, thin box made from tough paper, wrapped in a strange, seamless, transparent bag. The three disciples opened it, and the entire area around them was flooded with the gentle, faint aroma of some sort of unknown alcohol. It wasn’t altogether dissimilar to the fragrance of wine.

And so Celestine cut three pieces of the baked cake for each of them.



They were overwhelmed.

“This is...”

Celestine wore something of a defeated smile on her face as Julianne turned to her.

“It’s the devil’s cake. A demon gave it to me,” the high priestess whispered, taking a much larger bite of the cake than she offered her disciples. An almost radiant expression spread across her face.

Celestine had come to a conclusion all her own.

Yes, I must overcome this trial from God. And the only way to do that is to identify everything in this cake and feast upon it until I grow weary of it.

One could argue that she was taking one step forward and fifty steps back.

Celestine Fragan would eventually be known as the female saint who rose up to become the pope. As one of the Lord of Light’s followers, she possessed incredible magic power and great compassion. However, there was but one luxury, one desire, that she loved too deeply to ever give up: “devil’s cake.” One day, she shared this ephemeral cake with three of her most promising pupils, jokingly adding that it was given to her by a demon. It was a tremendously sweet and aromatic cake with a dash of bitterness to it, made from alcohol. This confection was so delicious that Celestine herself, never mind her pupils, could not win against its allure. It was rumored that this was the primary reason that the Temple of Light eventually became extremely familiar with the creation of sweets, ultimately attracting a plethora of patissier believers to the church.

With the help of her pupils, Pope Celestine managed to perfect the recipe for the cake. It was said that she always wore the biggest of smiles on her face when she ate it. Even after rising to the position of pope, she never quite stopped being embarrassed by her inability to cut this luxury from her life. Yet even then, the magical taste of the pound cake never failed to put a smile on her face.

Chapter 12:

B-Steak Romero nearly fell into despair as he watched the loathsome morning light illuminate the entrance to the cave.

“It’s already dawn?” he whispered.

“Wh-what’re we gonna do, Romero?” Julietta, his lover, gripped his hand tightly.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll protect you no matter what.”

Romero could feel her hand trembling in fear as he bit down on his lip. Having lived in the darkness on his own for so long, he thought he understood. He thought he understood what it would mean to be together with Julietta. But he couldn’t stop himself. After finally knowing the warmth of her love, there was no way that Romero could return to the darkness.

That was why it hurt so much, knowing that their pursuers were growing ever closer...

Death was knocking at their door.

Damn it all! If I were on my own, at least...

Indeed. If Romero were alone, he could at least accept his fate. His hands were already stained with blood. He was a being of the darkness that had taken many lives just to feed himself. He wouldn’t complain about meeting his end. He deserved it.

But Julietta was different. She chose to follow Romero out of the world of light but committed no sins of her own. She was still pure. The two of them fell in love and chose to live together. That was why Romero refused to let it end this way. He refused to drag his beloved with him down to the world of the Goddess of Darkness.

There has to be a way, Romero thought. Something, anything!

They couldn’t leave the cave. Their pursuers were already hot on their tail, and worse, the sun had risen. It was only a matter of time until they located this tiny cave. Things might have been different if the moon were still out, as it

granted those who lived in the world of the dead its powers. But the sun, the symbol of light and life itself, was not their ally. Should their pursuers catch them in the daylight, their future would be gone forever.

Then it happened.

“Ah! Romero, look at that! It’s... it’s...!” Julietta raised her voice as she noticed something in the depths of the cave.

“What? A door?!”

It was as though the heavens had extended one last helping hand, for there was suddenly a mysterious door in the cave.

What’s going on? Why is there a door here? No, wait a second...

A black door with a picture of a cat on it appeared seemingly out of nowhere. After recovering from shock, Romero began to think. He grabbed Julietta’s hand and walked in silence.

“Romero? What is that door? Do you know what it is?” Julietta and her lover drew ever closer to it.

“No, I don’t. But it can’t be any worse than staying here.” Romero answered her question and put his hand on the surface of the door. *What awaits us on the other side?* he wondered. *Despair? Or perhaps...*

With the sun already up, they would be forced to remain in the cave until nightfall, no matter what. At this point, their only option was to proceed forward and try to grasp at any sliver of hope they could. The ringing of a bell sounded off as the door opened, leading into a somewhat dark room. Romero was relieved. The sun couldn’t reach wherever this place was.

“Let’s go.” Romero urged Julietta on.

“Of course, my love. I decided long ago to follow you wherever you go. I’ll be with you until the end.” Julietta nodded, her face still pale. The two took hands and stepped into the dark room beyond the door, and as it closed shut behind them, it disappeared.

A short time later, multiple men came storming into the cave. The warriors gripped silver swords in their hands, said to be powerful against beings of the

darkness. Alongside them were wise sorcerers and priests of the Lord of Light. The latter had silver seals and spears made of white trees, crafted specifically to kill Romero. Around their necks were beautiful wreaths made from the aromatic galileo flower.

“Dammit! He’s not here, either!” one of the men cried.

“Blast it all! Where the hell did that cursed monster go?”

“It’s already morning!” a warrior said. “There’s nowhere left for him to run! Find him and kill him!”

“Oh, Lady Julietta, please be all right.”

A priest sighed. “No, I imagine it’s already too late. The young lady is probably already...”

The men were searching for the local lord’s young daughter, who had been kidnapped. As the sun rose into the sky, they continued their desperate search, unaware that the two had already fled to a place where they could no longer be found.

The couple looked around the lightless room, searching their surroundings.

“We’re in a basement, it seems...” Romero said.

Beyond the door was a somewhat narrow room.

“What is this place?” Julietta quietly brought herself closer to Romero, trembling with fear.

The room before them was a bizarre one. It was hard to imagine that a place like this was connected to the cave they were just in. There were lines of clean tables and chairs organized in the space. Each table had glass containers of some kind on top of them. On the walls were various pictures, and the wood floor was smooth and polished.

Is this some wizard’s room? Romero asked himself. *I know for a fact this place utilizes a kind of teleportation magic, but...*

Romero had lived some ten times longer than Julietta and was able to sense

the magic flowing throughout the room. This place was overflowing with magical energies. He could sense the power of fire and darkness in it. Fortunately for the two of them, it didn't appear to be the sort of dangerous magic that attacked uninvited guests, but that didn't change the fact that he didn't know what it was.

A tiny bit of light crept into the room from the back, where Romero could sense someone's presence. He assumed that must be the master of this bizarre locale.

What do I do?

Things moved quickly. Suddenly the room was as bright as day. Julietta screamed, and she and Romero immediately moved into defensive crouches.

"Dammit! A trap?!"

"Wait," said Julietta. "This light doesn't hurt..."

The light of this room was nothing like that of the sun or the holy light that the annoying servants of the Lord of Light wielded. There was nothing magical about it: it was meant to simply brighten the room.

"Whoa there!" said a voice. "Hey, welcome. You folks are certainly early."

Romero and Julietta heard a deep voice call out to them. It was coming from a middle-aged man standing at the far end of the room. He was a large, bearded man, appropriately fit for his age. He didn't appear to be a sorcerer or warrior.

Judging by his stance and the limited magical energy of the man, Romero could tell he wasn't someone who could hurt them. With that clear, Romero let down his guard for the time being. Unaware of any of this, the man continued to talk.

"Man, I'm sorry. We're still just getting ready... Is everything all right? You both look pale as a ghost."

Romero blinked. "Oh, uh, don't worry about it. We've always been like this. We're both fit as a fiddle."

The man seemingly still had no idea what he was face to face with as he questioned the couple. Romero answered his question truthfully. While they

both lacked sleep, they were feeling relatively healthy thanks to the lack of light.

“Might I ask, what is this place?” Romero collected himself.

He understood that the door in the cave was some kind of teleportation magic, which meant that it was safe to assume that they had surfaced somewhere else entirely.

“This is Western Cuisine Nekoya, a restaurant! Folks from your side call us the Restaurant to Another World, though.” As the master of this place, the man answered as he always did.

“This is a restaurant?” Romero asked.

“Are you telling me we’re in a different world right now?” Julietta gasped. They both shot their questions to the man at the same time.

“That’s right. For folks like me who live on this side, this is just a regular old restaurant. But for you ladies and gents over there, yeah, this is another world. Apparently.”

The man continued, flashing them a smile.

“So now that that’s outta the way, would you care to grab a bite to eat? Despite our size, we’ve got great ratings you know?”

Julietta whispered, “Romero, we should probably eat something. That way, we can, um, be a ‘customer’ here.”

“Hm, good point.”

Romero nodded his head to Julietta’s keen advice. If this truly was a restaurant, then by placing an order, the two of them would become customers. This meant that as long as they ordered something, they could stay at their table even until sunset without the master complaining. If they could use this place to hide out, that would be perfect.

“Understood. Then could we have two orders of your most expensive dish? Oh, and if you have any blood-red wine, we’d love two glasses.”

And so Romero placed their orders. Fortunately, he had money. He knew nothing of what the food from the other world was like, but surely the master

wouldn't complain if they ordered the most expensive meal on the menu.

"The most expensive dish, eh? Let's see... That'd be the b-steak cooked beef. Are you okay with that? The stew's not ready yet, unfortunately. And yes, we do have red wine."

B-steak was the most expensive dish Nekoya had other than the beef stew. The previous master always used to refer to the beef steak as b-steak, so it became something of a tradition. Unfortunately, the meal wasn't particularly well-liked in the other world. Apparently, beef just wasn't all that popular. Recognizing this, the master made sure to confirm the order with his customer.

Romero instinctively made a face upon hearing that the b-steak was made from cooked beef but then remembered himself and nodded politely at the master. "Cooked beef, eh? Fine. We'll have that. Also, would you mind not using any garlik? The both of us are terribly sensitive to its scent."

At the end of the day, they were only placing orders so that the master wouldn't give them a hard time about sticking around. It didn't matter if the food was terrible or not. As long as there was no garlik in the dish, they could handle it. Beings such as Romero and Julietta were highly vulnerable to the herb.

"You got it. Hang on just a moment, and feel free to sit wherever you'd like." The master returned to the back.

"He's gone..." Julietta murmured.

"I think we're safe now."

The couple grabbed seats and let out sighs of relief, all the tension draining from their bodies. It had been three days since Romero and Julietta hit the road running. It was highly doubtful that their pursuers would ever find this place.

"So, cooked beef is the most expensive thing here, eh? What kind of restaurant is this?" Finally relaxed, Romero whispered to his partner as he looked around the interior.

"Good question. It's too bad. This place is so nice-looking." Julietta agreed with her lover and also took a glance around the room. It was a well-kept, comfortable little restaurant. The temperature was neither too hot nor too

cold, and while the furnishings and decor were rather plain, the way everything was polished and organized made it all seem that much classier. Furthermore, on each table were a set of glass containers filled with herbs, spices, and sugars, free for them to use. As far as Romero and Julietta were concerned, this was clearly a fancy restaurant.

And yet they served beef.

For Romero and his partner, beef could best be described as the absolute bottom of the barrel. In their world, cows were most often used as farming tools to help create fields for growing crops. This was primarily due to the fact that they were much slower than horses but significantly more powerful. They were also used to produce milk. Those were the primary reasons that a farmer might own a cow. One would find themselves eating cow only after the creature had grown old, gotten injured, or could no longer produce milk. Only then would they be killed and eaten. It went without saying that the quality of the meat was significantly lower than that of a lamb or sheep, which would be killed and eaten immediately after harvesting its wool. It also paled in comparison to beast meat acquired by skilled hunters. Beef was tough and gamey, so it was primarily used as food for the poor, farmers, or dogs. That was just the way it was.

Not to mention the effort needed to stew the beef for a long period of time and extract the scum from it. Simply cooking the beef would only make it leathery and hard to eat. Romero and Julietta weren't the only ones who felt this way; most people in their world believed this to be the case.

"Well, whatever. It's not like I actually want to eat anyway." In his mind, Romero was paying for the right to sit in the restaurant.

Having made peace with his own logic, he let out a yawn. "I'm dreadfully sleepy."

"Me, too," said Julietta.

Being in such a cozy environment caused their exhaustion to catch up with them. At this time of day, the two of them would normally be fast asleep, and given their current set of circumstances, their fatigue was unavoidable. Eventually, the master returned with their food.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here are your b-steaks, topped with chaliapin sauce. I know you both said no garlik, but what about oranie?” The master asked the couple.

He only realized it after having made both b-steaks, but most folks in the other world that couldn't handle heavily aromatic herbs like garlik frequently disliked oranie. In other words, onions. If these customers were the same, he'd have no choice but to go back and remake the b-steaks with soy sauce.

“No, that's fine,” said Romero. “As long as there's no garlik, I can handle it.”

“Me as well. Thank you.”

Garlik was the only herb that had any effect on them. Plus, using a strong taste to mask the smell of the beef was a smart idea. That said, they still didn't expect much from the meal.

The master smiled. “Thank goodness. All right then, here are your b-steaks.”

With a relieved expression on his face, he grabbed the food from his cart. He brought out plates of sizzling meat, bowls of soup, and bread.

The steak had an incredible aroma.

“You're telling me that this is beef...?” Romero couldn't help but let the words slip from his mouth. This was far different from what he envisioned when he made their order.

“Yup! Unfortunately, we don't serve wagyu beef here, but I can guarantee you that we use the good stuff! It's dang delicious.” The master replied to Romero and lined up the food in front of them. The b-steaks were on black metal plates, and the meat was topped with an assortment of colorful vegetables, meat juices, and a sauce mixed with some kind of thinly cut brown stuff. The beef sizzled on top of the metal plate, its great smell wafting into the air.

“Ah, and here is your red wine,” the master said.

“O-oh, you have my gratitude.”

After checking with the couple, the master began to carefully pour wine for them. The thick red liquid filled up the finely crafted glasses.

“Oh, and bread and soup refills are on the house. Take your time and enjoy.” With his job done, the master returned to the back of the restaurant.

“This is quite a ways better than I expected.” Romero whispered his reaction to the food lined up in front of him. Everything looked delicious. The fragrant aroma and even the visuals of the food made his mouth water. He didn’t expect much from the meal, which in turn ended up making the smell of the b-steak in front of him that much more appetizing.

“Shall we eat?” Julietta asked.

“Of course.”

The couple nodded at one another and grabbed their utensils. Come to think of it, the last thing they had eaten was a rabbit they caught the night before. They even bit into the animal while it was still alive. At this point, they were simply grateful to have any kind of decent meal at all. The pair stuck their forks into the meat and cut with their knives.

“Oh, how tender.”

Romero was stunned by the feel of the meat. It was so soft that he could only assume either the chef was a pro at preparing it or the quality of the meat was exquisite to begin with. The knife cut through the steak with no resistance whatsoever. The slightly red insides of the meat peered out from the cut as its juices flowed freely onto the hot plate, creating a sizzling sound. As they took in these sights and sounds, both Romero and Julietta took bites.

“Oh, my.”

Julietta couldn’t believe her taste buds. The meat was so incredibly tender. With each chew, the fine beef split apart, spreading its fatty flavor throughout her mouth. The meat juices fused with the salt and high-quality pepper, while the heat of the thinly cut, raw oranie fused with the sweetness of the lightly-cooked oranie. These great tastes were brought together by the delicious brown sauce.

“So that’s why this is the most expensive dish on the menu,” Julietta said.

Now that she’d actually eaten the dish, she understood. The already high-quality beef had been treated in order to bring out its maximum potential. It

was so tender that it was hard to believe it was actually from a cow. Meanwhile, the sauce atop it was delicious in its own right. Using colorful vegetables helped to make the dish visually appealing and beautiful.

As the daughter of a noble family, Julietta was experienced in all manner of luxuries, and yet this was a completely new experience for her. She could say without a doubt that this wasn't simply "cooked meat." She fully understood why this was the most expensive dish here.

"And this is what cow tastes like when raised specifically to be eaten. I'd heard the rumors, but..." Julietta said.

Sitting across from Julietta, Romero agreed with her assessment. Now that he gave it some thought, in the Kingdom and the Empire, as well as a handful of other large nations, cows were bred specifically with eating in mind. They would also take newly born and cook them as food. Apparently, young cows that knew nothing of the strains of physical labor produced tender, delicious meat incomparable to the average stuff. It was said to even be fit for royalty. Romero hardly expected to encounter such a delicacy at a street-level restaurant such as this.

No, that's right. This is the Restaurant to Another World.

Romero remembered the master's words from earlier. It had taken some time to get there, but he finally understood their true meaning. As far as he was concerned, he knew of no restaurants that could produce food like this in his world. He said to Julietta, "We made the right choice in fleeing here."

"Yes, you're right. I doubt that Father, the knights, or the priests can follow us here."

The couple held their transparent wine glasses up.

"To our future in the dark of night," said Julietta.

"So that we might have the blessings of the Goddess of Darkness."

Romero and Julietta indulged in the red wine after offering words of prayer, meeting eyes and smiling at one another over its delicious flavor.

For this one moment in time, despite the accursed sun's presence high in the

sky, the couple were able to share a wonderful, joyous time together.

By the time they returned to the cave from whence they came, it was already evening.

“It looks like we’ve been saved,” said Julietta.

“Indeed. For a brief moment, I wasn’t so sure what would happen to us.”

After their toast, the couple enjoyed the soft bread and soup accompanying their meal and went on to try a variety of other foods as well. They ended up staying in the restaurant until the sun set. That day, all sorts of customers came by and ordered all manner of dishes. There were commoners and even nobles. Julietta was stunned to see a princess of much higher noble rank than even herself. Knights, swordsmen, and even mercenaries stopped by at different times of the day. The pair even saw a sorcerer and a diviner. Visitors also included other races like elves, dwarves, and halflings. Much to Romero and Julietta’s shock, Lizardmen and Lilliputians even dropped in for a bit. The restaurant had all manner of customers.

Each one of these visitors ordered dishes that Romero had never seen before and indulged themselves in them.

“But I couldn’t believe my eyes when that high priestess of light showed up.”

“Heehee. You should have seen your face.”

Just as the sun was beginning to set, a high priestess bearing a Gold Sigil came to the restaurant with three young priestesses, likely her disciples, in tow. One could spend their whole life at a monastery, dedicating themselves to their beliefs, and even then it was unlikely they would ever become a high priest or priestess. Only the truly gifted were afforded that title. Judging by the shape of the high priestess’ sigil, she was a follower of the Lord of Light. What rotten luck.

The couple froze in place upon seeing the young woman and her companions. Julietta almost fainted on the spot, Romero moving close to steady her. They then spent the next chunk of time attempting to lay as low as possible.

Fortunately, the high priestess who seemed to be watching over the three girls didn't seem to notice them. If she did, she chose not to engage in a "monster hunt" so as to not disrupt the other customers. In fact, she never so much as even glanced in their direction, too focused on enjoying the confectionaries and tea that she and her disciples ordered. Once they purchased a gift to take with them, they peacefully left the restaurant. It was easy to joke about it in retrospect, but if Romero and Julietta ever had to face off with a high priestess in real combat, they would stand no chance. Those of that title were said to be capable of even annihilating liches from this world. In that sense, Romero and Julietta were tremendously lucky.

"Well then, shall we be on our way?" Julietta asked.

"Yes. I will always be by your side, my love," answered Romero.

And so, the lovers who had been saved by good fortune took each other's hands and shared a kiss. They had vowed to each other that no matter what hardships awaited them, they would be together. That was why Romero chose to drink of her blood, and that was why Julietta decided to throw everything away so that she could be with him.

"Your hideout is just a little further, right?"

"Yes. If we fly all night, we should get there. Just hold on for a little while longer. And maybe, once we've finally managed our escape, we can visit that restaurant again."

"I'd quite like that. We owe the master our lives, after all. Not to mention the amazing food!"

They'd finally gotten this far. With their hearts and stomachs full, the couple shape-shifted into a legion of bats and flew across the moonlit night sky.

Chapter 13:

Sandwiches The Restaurant to Another World had a number of regulars.

They lived all over their world, but they all managed to discover a door of their own. Once every seven days, they used this door to visit the restaurant. They were the kind of customers who made eating the other world's cooking a part of their lives.

The doors themselves appeared in locations that had relatively strong magical power but otherwise were not particularly picky about where they materialized.

It was actually quite rare for a door to appear in towns, back streets, or places like castles. More commonly, the doors would appear in areas far removed from civilization, awkwardly standing out in the middle of nowhere. In fact, there were still plenty of doors that had yet to be found or used.

As such, the customers at the Restaurant to Another World, especially the regulars, tended to be a weird bunch even among the citizens of that world. These folks who came from all over did their best not to dig too deep into each other's backgrounds. Even if there was someone world-famous present, or even someone they were mortal enemies with, it was good manners to look the other way and pretend they didn't see a thing.

After all, this was another world.

What they believed to be common knowledge didn't necessarily mean anything here, and they shouldn't assume it did. Plus, if they got out of line, the master might ban them from the restaurant forever.

And so the regulars made it a point to forget their petty squabbles and respect each other while in Nekoya, occasionally stepping in to stop new customers when they unknowingly started trouble. The only exception to this was when it came to food.

The regulars who dropped by once every week without fail all generally had a dish they loved so much that it became their nickname. Each and every one of them believed that dish to be the best of all items served at Nekoya, so when

the conversation turned to food, arguments frequently arose.

This just happened to be one of those days.

“Say what?! Are you out of your mind?! You’ve never even experienced the divine taste of bread and minced meat cutlets that’ve been drenched in sauce overnight!”

“Hmph, right back at you, girl! You know nothing! The combination of shripe and tartar sauce is delectable even when cold!”

This particular war of words was being held between the seemingly well-raised, lightly dressed adventurer known as Minced Meat Cutlet, and the young, well-built knight with a famous blade known as Fried Shrimp. The two of them had only recently begun coming to the restaurant but quickly became regulars in no time at all. They started arguing amongst themselves after just happening to take seats next to one another.

“Hm? Are those two youngsters having an argument?”

The older samurai, Teriyaki, arrived after the pair’s squabble began and so turned to his friend, Pork Loin Cutlet, for answers. The latter was a thin, elderly gentleman who was a veteran regular at Nekoya.

“Yes. They’re apparently arguing over what dish makes for a better sandwich.”

As always, the older gentleman was drinking a cold mug of otherworldly ale while nibbling at his order of pork loin cutlet. He explained that this all began when the pair each ordered their favorite dish in sandwich form to go.

A sandwich was a meal made of two slices of white bread with various ingredients placed in the middle. It was delicious when cold, and it was possible to order as takeout.

Or at least that was how sandwiches were described in the Eastern Continent’s language in Nekoya’s menu. When it said various ingredients, it meant just about anything that the master made outside of soup. He could turn most anything into a fairly delicious sandwich.

Generally speaking, there were three basic kinds of sandwiches on the

restaurant's menu. The first was Nekoya's specialty, two slices of white bread with thinly cut eggs, topped with mayo. The next was a sandwich containing some kind of pink, sliced meat topped with cheese and leafy vegetables. The last was a sandwich made with fish marinated in oil with mayo. However, most regulars tended to order their favorite dish in sandwich form. One could describe this as the restaurant's secret menu.

"Dear me, they're fighting over that?" Teriyaki let out a sigh. How absurd it was. What point was there in getting so heated over sandwiches?

"Indeed. How are we supposed to relax and enjoy our meals like this?" said Pork Loin Cutlet.

The two men stood up, clearly used to having to step in, and approached the youngsters embroiled in argument.

"Why don't you understand?! Minced meat cutlet sandwiches are the best! It's good even when it's cold! The thinly sliced pieces of meat are stuffed with delicious juices that just come pouring out when you bite into them! Plus the sweet and sour sauce goes perfectly with the vegetables. It's an amazing dish!"

Minced Meat Cutlet refused to step down. The first time she visited Nekoya, the master gave her a minced meat cutlet sandwich to go as a gift. She ended up leaving the dish to sit for quite some time, and it eventually grew cold. When she finally ended up eating it, it turned out to have a completely different flavor to it than before, yet it was still delicious. Since then, she made it a point to always order one on the way out. It was that good.

"Hmph! This is the problem with Kingdom girls such as yourself! Like I said earlier, the brilliance that is shripe and tartar sauce is just as strong when cold! By frying the fluffy shripe, you get a wonderfully crunchy texture from each and every bite! You can feel the sweetness of it spread throughout your mouth! Combine that with the sourness of the tartar sauce, and you're left with something simply divine! Did you know that the fried shrimp sandwiches here have a fruity red vegetable and leafy green vegetables in them as well? So after you take a bite, you get to see the delightful juxtaposition of the white shripe meat and the colorful vegetables! Not only is it delicious, but it's a work of art in and of itself! Minced meat cutlet, with its brown surface and insides, could

never hope to compare!”

On the other end, Fried Shrimp refused to back down as well.

On his second visit to Nekoya, he was made aware of the secret menu by the legendary swordsman who accompanied him. By putting the fried shripe between slices of bread and letting it sit, the dish transformed into something else entirely. While Fried Shrimp agreed that the minced meat cutlet was indeed one of the restaurant’s finer dishes, it stood no chance against the allure of fried shrimp.

Teriyaki and Pork Loin Cutlet cleared their throats in front of the pair that refused to back down.

“Now, now. There’s no need to fight, you two.”

“This is a place for enjoying the finest of foods. They say that conversation can spice up a meal, but if you go overboard, you’ll spoil the taste.”

The young pair went quiet and turned their gaze to the two older gentlemen. One of them was a great hero and the greatest sage in all the world. The other was a wandering foreign swordsman whose skills were renowned across both continents. Having two of the restaurant’s most famous regulars chide them was enough for the two newbies to quiet down.

“I’m sorry. I went overboard. Fried shrimp is certainly delicious in its own right,” Minced Meat Cutlet conceded.

“No, no. I’m also sorry. We all have our favorites, right?” Despite their reluctance, the two apologized to each other.

Teriyaki and Pork Loin Cutlet quietly reminisced about how they too used to squabble like that back during the days of the previous master.

This brings me back. We always used to fight over which dish was the most delicious, Teriyaki thought to himself.

The first Minced Meat Cutlet would always get into fights with Croquette about how his dish was the most delectable of them all, remembered Pork Loin Cutlet. *I suppose it runs in the blood.*

And so the pair of older men reflected on the past, all the while admonishing

the hot-blooded youngsters in front of them.

“Exactly. Minced meat cutlet and fried shrimp are both delicious. But if we’re talking about what makes for the best sandwich, pork loin cutlet is the clear winner.”

“No, no. Pork loin cutlet tastes best when served hot. If you’re going to make anything a sandwich, teriyaki chicken is the one true answer. It tastes great even when cold.”

The two veterans instinctively faced each other, looks of disbelief on their respective faces.

“Weren’t you supposed to be a rice man? And anyway, how’re you even supposed to put teriyaki chicken between slices of bread?” Pork Loin Cutlet stood up and shot his old friend a pointed question.

Teriyaki normally ordered rice with his dish of choice. Only on the rare occasion that he ordered a different meal would he request bread. That made his suggestion of a teriyaki chicken sandwich all the more puzzling. It certainly didn’t help that Pork Loin Cutlet couldn’t believe that the sweet and sour soy sauce of the teriyaki chicken went well with bread.

“Right back at you! You never eat bread! You always order your pork loin cutlet with a large beer, do you not? Why would you bring it up now?”

On the other hand, Teriyaki found himself puzzled. Pork Loin Cutlet always got to the restaurant earlier than he did and was always there for much longer as well. In all of his days as a regular of Nekoya, he only ever saw the man eating pork loin cutlet and drinking beer.

In the handful of instances that Teriyaki witnessed Pork Loin Cutlet order something else, he always made sure to have it with a beer, not bread. The swordsman was more than aware that bread and cutlet went together well, but he was shocked to hear that Pork Loin Cutlet ordered them together. Both men replied to each other in disbelief.

“That’s not true at all! Once a month I order a pork loin cutlet sandwich to go. No vegetables, just meat, sauce, and mustard. Put some butter on the bread and eat it when it’s cold! That’s the best way to enjoy the savory, greasy pork.

The bread even softens up from the overflowing meat juices and sauce. Add a dab of mustard for that extra zap of hotness and you have a masterpiece!”

Pork Loin Cutlet explained his once-a-month tradition to his friend. He would stay at the restaurant until just around the time the magic dragon showed up, go home, sleep, and then the next day he would indulge in the sandwich. Compared to the bread itself, the actual pork loin cutlet was thick, topped with plenty of sauce. It was more than enough to fill the legendary hero’s stomach, and it felt great. This was his special lunch that he had enjoyed since the days of the previous master.

“Now hang on there. You see, I only just found out recently, but teriyaki goes extremely well with bread. The thinly sliced teriyaki chicken and fresh cucumber drenched in that sweet and sour sauce, combined with oranie sandwiched between slices of bread with mustard spread on them... Somehow, it all mysteriously comes together! Not to mention, I hear that teriyaki chicken sandwiches are quite popular in this world!”

The samurai learned of teriyaki chicken sandwiches from the master on the same day that he brought Fried Shrimp to Nekoya and told him of the hidden menu. He’d never forget the first time he ate it. His preconceived notion that teriyaki chicken and bread didn’t match was blown away by the tremendous explosion of flavors in his mouth.

It didn’t take long for the two stubborn old men to exchange fierce glares and start arguing.

This of course led to the other customers getting into their own squabbles.

Around this time, both old regulars and new regulars alike were gathered together, and they all began to argue for their personal favorites.

“I personally like a good Neapolitan spaghetti dog on a roll. Did you know that the Neapolitan spaghetti served here has quite the strong flavor when put between slices of bread? The tangy flavor of the ketchup holds its own against the soft white bread. It’s really something else!” The heir to one of the Kingdom’s great merchant businesses suggested the rather fantastical option of combining noodles with bread. According to him, it was delightful.

“Oh, my. I see the young one there hasn’t quite figured out the way things

work. If you want to talk about noodles that go wonderfully with bread, speak of none other than yakisoba with its aromatic, thick sauce. With just cabbage, noodles, and that meat, the red ginger and greens stand out that much more elegantly. It's truly a sight for sore eyes," a new voice spoke up.

"I hate agreeing with you, but nonetheless, I must. While it's not quite as good as freshly cooked okonomiyaki, yakisoba in a roll is a true delicacy. The sweet yet sour flavor of the sauce combined with the pork, cabbage, and red ginger make for a savory, dare I say, heavenly, experience."

Both the diviner and the samurai from the Western Continent spoke of the majesty of yakisoba with its cabbage and sauce.

"Um, when it comes to sandwiches, I personally adore ones with sweet fruits and cream inside. The gentle sweetness of the latter and the tart flavor of ripe fruit seem like they should clash, but when combined, they're really quite delicious!"

The radiant princess from the Empire spoke of the joys of the fruit sandwich, a food that she recently began ordering on the way home every time she dropped by.

"If we're talking fruit sandwiches, I think custard is the way to go. Its rich sweetness blends beautifully with the fruits and bread. It also doesn't make the bread soggy."

Meanwhile, the Witch Princess from the Duchy who loved Nekoya's pudding spoke highly of the fruit sandwich as well. Only unlike the other princess, she recommended using custard cream, an ingredient that held a similar flavor to pudding.

And so the restaurant was enveloped in a fierce war of words for some time.

Which sandwich was the best?

It was a battle reserved only for customers who knew of the secret option known as takeout.

"How absurd." Fardania, a traveling elf who hadn't dropped by the restaurant in about half a year watched the fighting go on with exhausted eyes.

She ordered the same tofu steak she did on that unforgettable day when she first visited Nekoya and had her pride wounded, prompting her to set off on a journey around the world. Fardania watched the other customers bicker amongst themselves while she ate.

She wasn't a regular. She only just happened to hear from a halfling that there was a door nearby and swung in for a bite. The journey to the restaurant took her on a roundabout path that put her three days away from her next objective, the elven capital. However, given the lifespans of elves, this was an extremely minor delay.

"Phew."

The elf placed her fork down after finishing her tofu steak. It was just as delicious as the one she ate half a year ago.

"Thank you, Master. It was delicious." As much as it pained her to admit it, if she wasn't honest here, that in and of itself would mean admitting defeat.

"You're quite welcome." As usual, the master nodded his head without saying anything unnecessary to the elf girl.

"By the way, does this place have any rice dishes available for takeout?" Fardania had been wondering about this for some time. Unfortunately, the bread at Nekoya smelled ever-so-slightly of milk, making it impossible for her to eat. The rice on the other hand was tremendous.

"Yeah, we have something, I suppose." The master thought to himself for a moment before replying.

"Really?" Fardania was both surprised and not surprised by the answer that came back to her.

"Well, since we call ourselves Western Cuisine Nekoya, we don't really have it on the menu, but..." Nonetheless, the master went on.

"I think I could make some grilled rice balls for you as takeout."

As a result of Western Cuisine Nekoya's promise of free rice refills, the restaurant frequently had an abundance of leftover rice at the end of the day. Since the master couldn't just reuse rice the next day, he would often either

offer it to employees or eat it himself after work. He didn't like wasting food. It was during these times that the master would baste the rice with sweet sake and soy sauce, and make them into grilled rice balls.

It was a simple dish that involved rolling the leftover rice into balls and covering them with mirin and miso before grilling them. The smell of the crisp surface combined with the aroma of the mirin and miso made for an appealing scent. The dish was so popular with the master's employees that on days with lots of leftover rice, an entire plate's worth of rice balls would disappear into their stomachs in mere moments.

Of course, it went without saying that if he were to serve them to customers, he'd have to make them a bit fancier than the ones he served his employees or ate himself. As long as he made sure of that, he saw nothing wrong with accepting money for them.

"Then can I have whatever that is? The food in the human town I'm staying in isn't very good at all." Fardania wore a composed expression on her face as she placed her order. She knew full well that this restaurant would once again surprise her with something she never saw coming.

"Coming right up. It'll be right out." The master returned to the kitchen, pondering what to do about seasonings.

I suppose I'll just roll with the usual combo of seaweed soy sauce, mirin, and a dash of sesame seeds sprinkled on top. One of them can be onion and miso... Ah, and for the last one, maybe I can toss in some seaweed strips.

And so the master got to work grilling the rice balls while also preparing some bread. Having run this restaurant for over ten years now, he knew what was coming next. It always ended up like this on days when the customers started arguing amongst themselves.

"Ah, geez! Look, you'll understand once you try it, okay?! Master! Get this know-it-all a minced meat sandwich, please!"

"In that case, one fried shrimp sandwich for the girl, sir!"

"Hey, Master! I'd like one of those teriyaki chicken sandwich things! If you're going to be that stubborn about it, fine! I'll give it a try!"

“Then get me a pork loin cutlet sandwich! Though we all know it isn’t going to taste better than a teriyaki chicken sandwich!”

“Master, I’d like one of those yakisoba sandwich things. I’m rather curious about the combo of noodles and sauce.”

“Master, get me a Neapolitan on a bun! Let’s see what all the fuss is about!”

“Then I will have the same thing. I leave it in your hands, Master.”

“In that case, how about we compare them here and now? That way we can be sure,” said the Witch Princess.

“Bring it on! Excuse me, could we get two fruit sandwiches, one made with cream and one made with custard?” replied the imperial princess.

And just like that, the orders kept on coming. The master couldn’t help but chuckle at how predictable it all was.

“Aye, you got it!”

The master wore a grin on his face, his hands moving as fast as they could to prepare his customers’ orders.

Chapter 14:

Pancakes Deep in a certain forest, far away from human eyes, was a tiny, nameless village. With a population of around 100, each of the villagers wore matching grass-dyed clothes and lived off of the fruits and nuts from the trees near their home.

Those who lived here were not humans. No, they were tiny people named Lilliputians who could fit in the palm of a human hand. While fairies were also small, they had wings and could fly across vast distances and often had dealings with humans. Lilliputians, on the other hand, tended to build small villages and live their whole lives there, rarely dealing with other races. These Lilliputians were similar, hardly interacting with humans aside from the old witch living by herself in the forest. They traded medicinal ingredients like fruits and nuts with her, as well as various metals for forging work. Other than her, there was only one other human they had any kind of dealings with.

Most of the Lilliputians were born in the village, raised in the village, and would die there as well. They were a tiny people that lived much like humans did.

However, every seven days came the one day that they all looked forward to. The men who worked hard, the women who busied themselves with house chores, and even the children having fun outside all made their way to the same location.

Their destination? The Restaurant to Another World. For the Lilliputians, this day was much like a festival.

On the day of their excursion to the restaurant, all the Lilliputians gathered together in a small opening deep in the forest, just a short distance from the village.

“All right! We got it hooked!” A young man, the best tree climber in the village, used a rope made of vines to lock the golden protrusion coming from the door into place, facing down. He then called out to the other men waiting below him. Because the black door had no places to grip onto, climbing it was a

struggle. There were a handful of people who could make their way to the golden protrusion, but most of the time it tended to be the young man who did it.

“All right! Everyone, get ready to pull! Heave, hooo!!”

“HEAVE, HOOO!” “HEAVE, HOOO!” “HEAVE, HOOO!”

“You can do it, Daddy!”

“Just a little more!”

Showered in the encouraging words of the village chief, women, and children, the men pulled at the rope together.

Slowly but steadily, the black wall began to creak open. From afar, it was clear that it was actually a door with a picture of a cat on it. Unlike the other larger races, just the simple act of opening this door called for a great deal of concentrated effort on the part of the relatively weak Lilliputians. It required the men of the village to pull at the handle using the vine rope they made.

“There we go, we got it open! Everyone, hurry inside!”

After confirming that the door was open enough and the time was right, the elder gave the signal for the villagers to head inside. They followed his orders, one after the other, starting with the elderly and the women who were still breastfeeding their babies. After that came the children who could walk by themselves. The men were the last ones to enter. Once everyone was inside, the door shut behind them and disappeared. The forest returned to its natural, quiet form.

The room the Lilliputians found themselves inside of was lit by a different color of light than the forest. After moving to a corner of the room, they heard a voice rain down upon them from above.

—*Welcome.*

The loud voice came from the gigantic master of the restaurant. The huge man was well aware that when the door just barely opened, that was the sign that the little people had arrived.

The master went to the back and returned to them with a tray originally

meant for carrying food. On top of it was a folded moist towel. He brought it down close to the floor and spoke to his tiny customers.

—This way, please. I'll take you to your seats.

The Lilliputians were used to this process and immediately hopped onto the tray.

—Here we go!

Once about half of the villagers were onboard and the tray full, the master brought them to their seats.

“Whooooaaaa! This is awesome!”

“Ahh! We're gonna fall!”

“Come now, make sure you wipe your hands and shoes. You can't get off unless you clean yourselves.”

All of a sudden, the tiny people found themselves high in the air. The children grew excited seeing other races as large as the master enjoying their food. Meanwhile their mothers scolded them. Everyone cleaned their hands and feet on the giant wet cloth on the tray and eventually, they arrived at their destination. Those who had already cleaned themselves departed their makeshift vehicle and made their way down to the table below.

—I'll be right back with the rest of your party.

The master took the tray back to the entrance and then returned with the rest of the villagers.

—Will you be having the usual? he asked.

Once the master confirmed that everyone was present and accounted for, he took their orders. The group of little people nodded in unison. It was then that the most beautiful girl in the village, the elder's daughter, stepped forward in a lovely dress. In her hands was a large silver coin with the face of a person on it. The Lilliputians had acquired it by trading nuts and fruits with the witch of the woods. Normally, the metal workers in the village would use it to craft kitchenware and other useful objects. However, they made a deal with the previous master that twice a month, they would give him one of these coins.

—Many thanks. I'll be right back.

The master picked up the large coin with just his index finger and thumb, and left for the kitchen. He would then go on to cook their absolute favorite dish while they waited.

“Wooooow! We’re so high up!”

“It’s soooooo big!”

“Stop right there! It’s dangerous! What are you going to do if you fall?!”

“Huh, so you’re saying it was an even smaller village back in the day?”

“That’s right. Before the door started showing up, we had maybe half the population we do now.”

“You think the folks who moved over here are doing all right?”

“I bet they are. I caught a glimpse of them a little while back. They were wearing otherworldly clothes, but I’m sure it was them.”

The Lilliputians spent their time waiting for the food in all sorts of ways. The mothers kept watch of their children to make sure they didn’t fall off the table, while other adults chatted over the latest rumors. It didn’t usually take long for the food to be brought out, but just the thought of its sweet deliciousness left them more impatient than usual.

Finally, the master returned with their order in hand.

—Here you are, folks. Your order of pancakes.

With a thud, the master placed a large plate of pancakes down in the center of the table. Lined up nearby were three ceramic containers about the size of buckets, filled with three different types of sweet syrup. The small people shouted out with glee; after all, this feast was only available to them once every seven days. It was for this very plate of soft, fluffy dessert that every week they chose to abandon their jobs and daily work in order to come to the restaurant.

“Oh, Master! I’m sorry, but would you mind cutting it for us?”

The village elder shouted his request up to the master of the restaurant. If he didn’t, there’d be no way for his voice to reach the large man.

—Aye, you got it!

The master nodded his head, spread some of the butter atop the pancakes with his fork and then cut it into pieces more than large enough for the villagers with his knife. The sweet aroma of the butter and the pancakes made the Lilliputians' mouths water.

—Take your time and enjoy. I'll bring out seconds as soon as you need 'em.

And so the moment the master said his final words to them, the Lilliputians shouted out with joy and rushed to the front of the pancakes.

There was a system to all of this, of course. It made sure that everyone was able to eat a fair and equal amount of food. First, there were those in charge of handing out the pancakes. These little ones would get close to the plate and hand the villagers their pancakes. This prevented fights from breaking out over people trying to grab their share. If something like that happened, the small children would likely suffer the most. By having a multi-tiered system in place, they could avoid that kind of situation.

On occasion, the pancake handlers would lick their buttery hands or grab some pancake crumbs from the plate. This was considered one of the perks of the job.

Only a few Lilliputians ate their pancakes immediately upon receiving them. Most of the small people actually headed for the buckets filled with syrup.

"I want more! Put more on 'em! Don't be so cheap!"

"Now, now. If you take too much, there won't be any left! We also have some to take home, okay?"

*"Hey, what're you doing?! Putting brown *and* black syrup on it is super unfair!"*

"Ah! That's no fair! You're eating the red fruit!"

"Oh, c'mon. It's not that big a deal."

The little people each lined up in front of the syrup bucket of their choosing, managed by the women of the village. These syrup handlers were extremely used to this task, using special brushes they brought from home to spread the

syrup over the pancakes. There were three different kinds available to the villagers: the brown and super sweet one was called “maple,” the black, slightly bitter one was called “chocolate,” and the sweet and tart one made by boiling red berries with sugar was “jam.”

Normally, a customer was allowed to request one type of syrup to go with their pancakes, but due to the villagers being split on who preferred what, the Lilliputians asked the master if he could give them a little bit of each instead. Only then did they finally have enough pancakes and syrup to satisfy everyone.

“Perfect! Everyone’s got some, right?”

After confirming that all the villagers had their share, the housewives began to fill the pots that they brought from home with maple syrup. This was one of the benefits of being a syrup handler. They were allowed to fill the pots and containers they brought from the village with all of the remaining syrup so that they could bring them home. Of course, there would be trouble if they skimmed on giving out syrup just so that they could take home more.

“Heehee, this is more than enough to use on our bread. We’re gonna be eating the good stuff for a while!” One of the Lilliputian wives wore a big smile on her face as she caressed the pot full of maple syrup.

The master’s syrup was as delicious as his pancakes, so just spreading a little bit onto regular bread made it that much more appetizing. While their small village had no name and didn’t stand out, it did have its own perks.

“Now that everyone has their share...”

The village elder checked once more to make sure that everyone had some warm, fluffy pancakes and syrup, then spoke to his people.

“Let us offer our thanks to the God of Earth for this bountiful feast. Dig in!”

And so the elder bit into his pancakes. An explosion of warm sweetness spread throughout his mouth. For his syrup, he chose the relatively simple, sweet maple. It had its own unique flavor and was significantly sweeter than the other syrups. Its flavor oozed out from the fluffy pancake with each bite.

“Mmm...”

The elder swallowed with a satisfied moan and quickly took a sip of the tea he brought from the village. The unsweetened, still-warm tea washed down the pancakes quite nicely.

“Phew...”

The sweet aftertaste was something else! Even though he’d just taken a bite, he found himself wanting more and immediately went for another. No matter how many years he ate this stuff, he never grew tired of how sweet and fluffy the pancakes were. It was easy to see how their population had doubled. People passing through would just happen to be around to experience the pancakes, and they too would become addicted to its flavor, choosing to move to the village.

“Father, would you mind sharing a piece with me? I would like to try some of the maple syrup.” The village elder’s only daughter was careful not to dirty her beautiful clothes while she ate her pancakes coated in jam.

She grew slightly jealous of her father after seeing him scarf down his portion. While her favorite type of syrup was the sweet and sour jam, just like her late mother, she couldn’t help herself after watching her father.

“Yes, yes. I understand,” her father said. “Here, take some.”

The elder chuckled and unsheathed the dagger at his waist, cutting off a chunk of his pancakes for her but also taking some of hers as well.

“Mm, this is quite good.”

He was actually quite used to this flavor. After all, jam was a favorite of his wife who passed away some ten years ago. It was sweet and sour, and just a little bit salty.

The village elder took a moment to look around and found that the rest of the Lilliputians were doing something similar. They were each sharing their own differently flavored pancakes with their families, lovers, and friends. Even the rugged blacksmith, who was almost twice as tall as the other Lilliputians, blushed after his small wife wiped the chocolate from his mouth.

Meanwhile, there was the one family known for its many kids. The little boys were mixing all of their syrups together to find out what they tasted like, which

of course left their mother in a tizzy.

The young man and woman who were always fighting were instead eating their jam and chocolate pancakes together, even trading with one another. This was the one thing which the two could see eye to eye on.

Elsewhere, the wives who were on syrup duty were happily discussing their respective bounties.

Three years ago, a single older sorcerer moved into the village. This same man, seemingly incapable of holding himself back, was digging into his pancakes so fiercely that his beard was turning brown. Similarly, the village had a single priest of the Lord of Earth who could wield healing magic. This old woman smiled brightly, surrounded by her grandchildren.

This was all a familiar sight to any Lilliputian who lived in the village.

—Sorry to keep you all waiting. Here are your seconds.

By the time the large set of pancakes found their way to the bottom of the villagers' stomachs, the master returned with a fresh plate.

The children who still had room in their stomachs, the youngsters who hadn't eaten enough yet, and the more gluttonous adults all gathered by the plate once more. While the Lilliputians courteously followed the rules the first time, the second plate was a completely different story. Because the elderly and smaller children were already full, this meant that the second wave was a battle of speed.

I'm starting to feel my age...

The village elder happily patted his own full stomach while warmly watching the youngsters battle over pancakes. Seeing the villagers this lively made all he had done to protect his home worth it. It felt like he was looking upon his young daughter again.

"Master, thank you very much!"

After getting their fill of pancakes and clearing the plates entirely, the village elder gave his words of gratitude to the master.

—You're most welcome. All right, all aboard!

As usual, the master quietly whipped out his tray and had the Lilliputians ride atop it. He went back and forth twice to carry them all to the entrance this time, their stomachs filled with two plates worth of pancakes.

—*We'll be looking forward to your next visit*, the master said, opening the door lightly.

"All right! Everyone's here, yes?"

"Yup!"

With that, the Lilliputians exited the restaurant as one, leaving none behind as the door closed.

"Man, there are always so many of those little guys," the master whispered to himself after watching them leave.

Back in the day, when they first started showing up, there was only about half as many. Actually, it was probably closer to a third. When was it that he became unable to carry them all in one go? The master returned to the kitchen while thinking about this.

"Haha, imagine if we started getting little people with wings one of these days?" he laughed to himself.

The master had seen winged races from the other world, and he had small guests like the ones from earlier. But he'd yet to see any tiny winged people.

"Yeah, probably not."

Anyway, it took multiple little people to open the door, given their strength. It was unlikely he'd be getting little visitors other than the ones from that village. The master returned to work.

He had no way of knowing that in a few days, a group of winged fairies would soon become regulars at his restaurant.

Chapter 15:

Ginger Pork *Thud*.

The young hunter, Yuuto, wiped the sweat from his brow as he looked down at the fallen horned boar from up in the tree. Directly below him, Taro growled at the fallen beast.

The wild boar moved not an inch. The arrow that Yuuto had shot into the bottom of the beast's neck was laced with a poison that caused a horrible paralysis once it entered the bloodstream. Fortunately, it also passed through the body fairly quickly, leaving the meat of the animal perfectly edible. These thick, poisonous arrows were an essential tool to the hunters of the Mountain Nation.

I can't let my guard down just yet, Yuuto thought to himself and remembered the adage: *Beasts at death's door are prone to killing hunters.*

The words belonged to his teacher, a middle-aged hunter who had once killed a bear with only a single bow. Yuuto cautiously approached the fallen animal in front of him. Horned boars were dangerous creatures. They were on a whole different level from the rabbits, deer, wild birds, foxes, or weasels that nobles and rookies hunted. The short, deadly weapon on their foreheads made them truly fierce creatures. Their skin, thick as armor, was capable of deflecting even a samurai's spear head-on. The horned boar could bring down an entire horse by itself.

There were as many fallen hunters and samurai who met their ends trying to take down a horned boar as there were stars in the sky. In fact, the tree that Yuuto was perched in had been on the receiving end of one of its attacks earlier and actually began to break.

To let his guard down now would be a death sentence.

And so after waiting patiently, Yuuto finally leapt down from the tree. He kept his bow at the ready, arrow drawn, and slowly approached the boar. After finally confirming that the beast was no longer of this world...

"I did it!" he exclaimed. "I actually took it down! I can't believe it! Taro, I'm

finally a full-fledged hunter!”

Yuuto shouted out with glee. One would only be recognized as a true hunter once they took down a fierce beast such as the horned boar. Full-fledged hunters would go into the mountains or woods to take down fierce beasts, sometimes even monsters, whenever they appeared, bringing fortune to towns and villages. They were treated differently from the average rookie who hunted birds and rabbits, and sold them for money.

Being a true hunter meant that the kinds of jobs he could take on increased tenfold. No longer would Yuuto have to settle for simply selling his prey. He could now take on requests from lords to lead samurai through the forest, serve as a bodyguard for merchants traveling through the woods, accept requests to take down fierce beasts for cash, and all manner of other jobs. If he performed well, he could even go on to buy a house of his own in town, take a wife, and live happily ever after.

That said, the horned boar that Yuuto defeated was weak compared to the other fierce beasts. Bears required multiple arrows to take down, while tigers were hunters in their own right. There were the giant snakes that snuck up on hunters quietly and crushed them to death, and even large beetles that soared through the sky and struck with their sharp horns. The latter even had armor capable of deflecting arrows. These were all much more difficult to defeat compared to Yuuto’s current prey. While the horned boar was fast, because it was incapable of climbing trees, one could simply climb to a high vantage point and shower it with arrows.

Of course, actually executing that strategy properly was no easy task. It was one thing to successfully escape from a horned boar, but it was another thing entirely to lure it to the base of a tree. All manner of things could go wrong. The hunting dog meant to lure the beast close could be killed, the hunter could be knocked from their tree of choice and gored by the creature, or they could simply run out of arrows and have no means of attacking further. And then of course there were the hunters who assumed they felled the boar, only to get close and meet their end via its dying strike.

It was fairly common to hear stories in the hunting world of rookies who either failed to take down a horned boar or were in turn murdered by one.

“This thing’s pretty dang big. I bet I can get 120, no, 150 silver coins for this.”

Yuuto examined the teeth marks that Taro had left on the back right leg of the beast and calculated its worth. If he sold what he could from this boar, he might be able to finally buy one of those magic bows that his teacher used. In the world of hunters, losing to one’s prey often meant death. However, should one prove victorious, there were large gains to be had. This was the way hunters lived.

Risk and reward.

It wasn’t particularly rare for true hunters to make upwards of two hundred or more silver coins for felling a single beast, but Yuuto was new to this. He had only ever hunted and sold small prey for a handful of silver coins at a time. This was his first experience defeating a creature worth over a hundred silver coins, and he couldn’t have been more excited about it.

Yuuto was still young. He’d only just become a true hunter. The young man was born the son of a local farmer, but as the fifth boy in the family, there was little hope of him taking over the business. This was why he decided to become a hunter’s apprentice. Yuuto began to get used to walking through the forests and mountains, following his teacher around and remembering the layout of the woods. He learned the skills to train a pup into a hunting dog and eventually was taught how to use a bow. It was at that point that Yuuto became an apprentice hunter.

The young man’s hunting dog, Taro, was the offspring of his teacher’s and another hunter’s dog. It took a full two years after the pup’s birth to be trained into a hunting dog. The apprentice hunter and his partner took down dozens of small creatures before finally deciding to go after the horned boar. They spent a full month preparing for the hunt and pulled it off perfectly.

“Taro, we’re gonna be feasting tonight!”

Yuuto pet his companion on the head. While horned boar meat could smell a bit gamey compared to your average pork, it had a thick, fatty flavor that was quite delicious. To celebrate their success, Yuuto was planning on eating the very best part of the creature’s body. Taro, seemingly reading the mind of his master, wagged his tail in anticipation.

The hunter immediately took to cutting up the boar, starting with bleeding out the beast. The huge animal must've weighed at least five times as much as Yuuto did. The young man intended to bring home the meat and its fur, as well as its horn and fangs. Unfortunately, its internal organs would spoil before he got back, and the bones didn't sell for very much to begin with, so he'd leave those here.

After bleeding out and skinning the beast, Yuuto tucked away the fresh meat and fur into one part of his bag, and the horn and fangs into another.

"That about does it! Let's get a move on, Taro."

Yuuto made sure to place the fatty chunks of meat into the clean bag at his waist and called out to Taro, who was wagging his tail while chewing on one of the boar's bones. The dog barked in response and followed his master, bone still in mouth.

"Now, we gotta get this stuff back before nightfall."

While it was true that the remains of the horned boar were much easier to carry now that its bones were gone and it had been bled out, there was still lots of meat to carry. Adult boars were large animals, after all. If they stayed in place for too long, eventually the scent of blood would attract other beasts. It was for this reason that Yuuto took half the meat and carried it to a small cabin nearby. The building had been designed to keep beasts away.

"Geez, even half of this thing is heavy," he muttered.

Despite his complaints, Yuuto was light on his feet and wore a smile on his face. This was the first time in his life that he was transporting a large creature that he defeated by himself. The simple process of moving it from one place to another was incredibly satisfying.

"Phew, we're finally done."

The small cabin had a storehouse with a strong door capable of withstanding the average beast. It was there that Yuuto brought the meat and fur, just as the sun was finally beginning to set. He let out a sigh. Even after getting rid of the unnecessary bits of the animal, the pieces he kept from it were still significantly heavier than he was. The young man wasn't actually all that far from where he

slayed the beast, which went to show how difficult it was to transport its remains.

“Man, it took this long just to come this far?” he wondered. “I might have to hire Sahe for this...”

At this point, the prospect of carrying this thing all the way to town seemed unlikely. Yuuto decided to head to the foot of the mountain in the morning and hire his acquaintance for help. The man had arms and legs several times larger than Yuuto’s and often took jobs from his teacher.

To think the day would come when I’d be the sort of hunter who hired others for help.

The thought made Yuuto happy.

“Well, whatever. C’mon, Taro. Let’s eat.”

Just after Yuuto happily called out to his partner, it happened. Taro began to bark at his master after noticing something.

“What’s wrong, boy? Is something the matter?” the hunter asked Taro. The dog barked once more before dashing.

“What’s with him? Did he find something?”

Yuuto followed Taro, who had stopped running to bark again. In front of him was a black door with the mark of a cat on it. It was as if it’d just sprouted there like a plant.

“I don’t remember there being a door here... No, there definitely wasn’t one here yesterday.” Yuuto remembered this place clearly. When he came through the day prior, this black thing was nowhere to be found.

An important part of being a true hunter is being able to recognize and remember when things in the forest had changed. Yuuto always did his best to stay aware. He’d never overlook a change as big as this. That being said, this black door was in fact real.

“Don’t tell me this is some kind of magic?” he said.

Magic was a concept that Yuuto knew little about, considering his upbringing in a small middle-of-nowhere town. Still, his town was home to multiple

diviners, and the priest would often cast prayer magic of the Lord of Wind on hunters.

Yuuto was fairly certain that the appearance of this door was caused by magic.

“The fact that Taro brought me here means it shouldn’t be dangerous. But still...”

Yuuto found it hard to believe that his well-trained hunting dog would make a mistake like that. Steadying his resolve, he placed his hand on the black door’s golden handle and turned it. It wasn’t locked. He heard the sound of a bell ringing as he pushed it open.

“Whoa!”

Having grown used to the darkness on the mountain, Yuuto was briefly blinded by the light coming from the other side of the door. He held his hands up to try and block it out.

“Welcome!”

Somebody spoke to Yuuto from inside. It was the voice of a middle-aged man. The hunter finally brought his hands down and took a look at his surroundings. He was in a strange place. There were multiple tables and chairs lined up, and people sat at them eating and drinking. It was like he was in...

“A pub?”

“Not quite. We’re a western...er, a restaurant. Though we do serve alcohol.” The master responded to Yuuto, clapped his hands once and welcomed his new guest. “Let’s try this again. Welcome! Is the little guy there with you?”

The boy in front of the master was still young. He couldn’t have been older than a high schooler. Next to him was a single dog sitting patiently. The master usually didn’t allow pets in Nekoya, but he had no problem with having them around if they were going to be as well behaved as this.

“Oh, uh, yeah. This is Taro. He’s my hunting dog. I assure you, he’s well trained,” Yuuto responded to the master while lost in thought.

Regardless of the reasons why it was in the middle of the mountains, he could

be sure it was in fact a restaurant. Judging by the atmosphere, it wasn't just a cheap pub like the one in his town but a classy joint like the ones the samurai would visit in the city.

Crap, Yuuto thought. I don't have any money.

From his surroundings he could smell all manner of delicious, unknown foods that the other customers were eating. Yuuto hadn't yet eaten dinner, so this was especially torturous for him. The aroma made him want to grab a bite.

Yet the truth remained that he had no money. Being a relatively new hunter meant his wallet was mostly empty to begin with. He also didn't think there to be any point in bringing money out into the wilderness where at most, he'd bump into fellow hunters.

Something other than money that I can use. Let's see... Ah!

Yuuto immediately realized he did have something of value on him. It was wrapped up in the bag at his waist.

"Um, Master? I would love to eat here, but the truth is that I don't have any money on me. So..."

He took the bag off his waist and handed it to the middle-aged man.

"I have the best cuts of a horned boar in here. If you could cook this for me, I'd happily give you whatever is left over."

The best meat from a horned boar. Normally, one would salt it, and a merchant would sell it to some high-class noble for them to eat. Folks far and wide sought the rare meat. Unless one was a hunter like Yuuto, it was the type of food that a commoner would never have the opportunity to eat themselves. Even this small amount of the fatty meat would fetch up to five silver coins. The hunter realized that this was quite a lot for a single meal, but at the end of the day, he and Taro were planning on eating it all to begin with. He might as well have it cooked by someone who knew what they were doing.

"Boar meat, eh?"

The master wore a complicated expression on his face. Nekoya normally didn't serve meals made from ingredients of the other world. The master

procured all of his meats and vegetables from stores in the shopping arcade and served what he thought was good. It was his own personal rule to only serve the customers what he would eat himself.

He normally didn't offer this kind of service to customers, but there was something about the boy in front of him. His eyes were sparkling. They had a zeal to them that the master had lost over twenty years earlier. He had the face of an innocent, reckless, young man, not entirely unlike all the local high school goofs who occasionally dropped in after class.

"You got it. I'll be cooking this up my own way. Is that okay with you?"

There was no way he could betray the expectations of someone like that, the master decided.

"Of course! Thank you so much!"

"Woof!"

Yuuto and Taro energetically answered the master's question.

"Alrighty then. Hold on just a moment. You can take a seat right here."

The master disappeared to the back for a brief moment before returning with a tightly wrapped cloth of some kind and a glass cup filled with water.

"Here you are. A warm towel and some water. I'm gonna get to cooking this meat up, so hang on for just a bit."

The middle-aged man once more disappeared into the back, this time to cook.

Since we're talking about fresh meat, I'm gonna have to soften it up a bit. Also, boar tends to be a bit gamey, so I should...

Having eaten boar meat before, the master began to think about what sort of dish best went with the slightly gamey ingredient.

Meanwhile, Yuuto examined the inside of the restaurant.

"What a strange little place."

Now that he had the chance to really take a closer look, Yuuto realized just how odd a collection of customers there were. There was a swordsman wearing a beautiful kimono not unlike those in the city, and even a diviner. Meanwhile,

there was a samurai with an overwhelming aura. Yuuto wouldn't have been surprised if the man ended up being some kind of master warrior. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about these men was that they were fairly normal compared to the other customers.

There were people present who clearly had different facial features than Yuuto. They were more than likely from the Eastern Continent. Their clothing quality and even hair styles were all over the place, as if they shared almost nothing in common. More surprising were the other races present: elves and dwarfs. There were even races Yuuto had never seen before.

The more I look, the crazier it gets! What a bizarre restaurant!

Fascinated, Yuuto watched them all happily eat their strange meals until the master returned.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Without making much noise at all, the master placed down a dish of food in front of Yuuto, along with a bowl filled with white rice and some kind of brown soup.

On the plate were thinly sliced fresh oranie and the horned boar meat that Yuuto brought with him into the restaurant. The grilled meat was garnished with chopped vegetables and some sort of brown sauce.

“This is grilled meat...?”

Yuuto was certain that the master would bring out some sort of soup. Boiling the meat to soften it seemed like the obvious direction to head in.

“Indeed it is! It's called ginger pork.” The master then turned his attention to his other guest.

“Here you go, buddy. No onions or ginger in this one. Be careful though, it's still hot.” The middle-aged man placed a takeout box full of food down in front of Taro. The dog fiercely wagged his tail after sniffing the food and confirming its entrancing aroma. His meal consisted of a healthy serving of rice topped with grilled meat and sauce. Dogs normally weren't supposed to eat foods with such heavy flavoring, but as long as this wasn't a recurring thing, once in a blue moon was fine.

“Please enjoy,” said the master. “Refills on rice and miso soup are free, so just let me know if you want more.”

With that, the master left the hunter and his partner, seeing another set of customers flag him down. It was the usual pair of goofs asking for seconds on okonomiyaki.

“This is the kind of food they make here...?” Yuuto found himself gulping as the rich scent of the sweet sauce and grilled meat reached his nose. He picked up a pair of chopsticks and then looked down at his dog.

“Taro, you can start eating, buddy.”

As soon as he was given permission, the drooling hunting dog immediately began to dig in. He ate loudly, his tail wagging back and forth endlessly. Taro was never this excited when he ate the usual spoils of the day.

Is it really that good?

Seeing his partner so excited raised Yuuto’s own expectations. He reached for the food with his chopsticks and grabbed one of the many thin pieces of meat on the plate.

Whoa, it’s so soft.

The meat was so tender that it felt like it might crumble under the pressure of the chopsticks. What kind of magic did the master use to make the hard boar meat so soft? Yuuto brought the piece of meat, covered in sauce and vegetables, toward his mouth. The light in the restaurant reflected off its shiny surface as the young hunter swallowed his own drool.

Yuuto took a bite.

“This is amazing!” The young man voiced his impressions immediately.

This was more delicious than anything Yuuto had ever eaten in his entire life. The sauce was sweet yet salty and even had a dash of spiciness to it. The flavor was totally unique. Just that alone was amazing enough. He imagined that topping a bowl of rice with the sauce would be a meal all its own.

But it wasn’t just that. The sauce went perfectly with the fatty boar meat. The surface was sprinkled with a grain of sorts that soaked up the sauce. It then

fused together with the meat juice and grease. It was positively delicious when eaten together with the vegetables.

How could there be anything in this world tastier than the meal in front of him? It would be only a few moments before he had that question answered for him.

“Whoaaaaaaa!”

It was delicious enough for Yuuto to roar into the air. Just when he thought the ginger pork was the pinnacle of cuisine, there was something even more incredible sitting in front of him: the rice. It was white as snow, with no millet of any kind. The fresh, plump rice existed in perfect harmony with the ginger pork.

The combination of heavy meat and light, plain rice left Yuuto feeling both satisfied and hungry for more. He took a bite of the pork, and then the rice, and then some more pork, repeating the cycle of bliss over and over again. On occasion, he munched on the oranie, some of the pickled vegetables, and sipped from the bowl of soup.

It went without saying that the bowl of rice emptied almost immediately.

“Excuse me! Can I get another serving of rice?! Make it a large, and fast, please!” Yuuto was almost panicked as he made his order.

“Aye, you got it.” The master had kept a close eye on the boy, so he was ready to provide seconds the moment he asked for them. The master packed a bowl filled with white rice and brought it out to his young customer just as Taro barked, signaling that he too desired more.

The dog and its master were quite alike. The master smiled to himself at the thought and prepared some more meat and rice for Taro.

Thus did the hunter and his partner’s joyous meal continue until the two of them could eat no more.

“Oof, I can’t take another bite,” Yuuto groaned.

Yuuto ended up getting three extra bowls of rice and one extra serving of ginger pork. He held his painfully full stomach and stepped out of the restaurant. Taro was no different, his own walking speed slower than usual due

to the extra weight he was packing.

“Taro, that sure was great! We gotta come again.”

The hunting dog still had enough energy in him to happily wag his tail in response to his master’s words.

Before leaving, Yuuto managed to learn about the secret of the restaurant. It was an eatery that could only be visited once every seven days. Even better, the cost of eating a meal there was significantly lower than Yuuto expected. It was cheap *and* delicious.

In fact, Yuuto’s own teacher, who made this his area of operations, often visited the restaurant and ordered the same thing as his disciple.

“I gotta give my thanks to Master, too.”

Come to think of it, his teacher was the one who had recommended hunting for horned boars in this area. This must have been his way of sharing his discovery with Yuuto. This was his way of showing his disciple the path to the Restaurant to Another World.

“All right, Taro! Let’s get some shut-eye. Tomorrow we’re gonna hire some help to carry this meat, so it’s gonna be a long day!” Yuuto said happily to Taro, who responded in kind with a bark.

Chapter 16:

Curry Rice

The vicious storm that attacked the island only a few days prior was gone, leaving behind yet another sunny day. Alphonse, preparing to leave his house, thought it was the perfect weather to go outside.

Beneath the sun, Alphonse looked down into the crude wooden barrel he had made himself. The water inside reflected his face. Twenty years ago, the king had gifted him a mithril sword breaker that he'd received from an elf. Now, using that dagger, Alphonse carefully shaved his beard away. He slid off the old sandals he'd made with straw, based on a design he'd seen on the Western Continent. He then slipped on a frayed suit that had clearly seen better days and a pair of holey boots. Alphonse next sheathed his mithril rapier at his waist. Though it was excellent for slaying monsters, it was relatively useless against wild animals. The sword was more of a prop to be hung on a wall at this point. While he usually made it a point to cut his white hair, it had grown out again. He tied it up with some dry grass.

Despite his current appearance, Alphonse was once an admiral in the great Duchy, the nation with the longest history on the Eastern Continent. This meant that even if it wasn't perfect, he had to dress suitably if he was going to go out. This was especially the case considering he was going somewhere incredibly special: a place he had a twenty-year-long relationship with. This place was simultaneously his singular hope and his savior. Today would likely be his final time visiting.

Holding those thoughts deep in his heart, Alphonse made sure to clean himself up more than usual.

"That oughta do it."

With his preparations complete, Alphonse made a mark on the wall with his sword. The wall in question was lined with sets of six vertical lines and one horizontal line across each group. These signified how much time Alphonse spent on this island and also told him when it was the "special day." He could no longer count how many times he'd waited for this day to come.

“Time to go.”

His mind filled with many thoughts, Alphonse said his usual words and exited his house. A quietness settled upon the cave where he lived alone, its walls covered in marks.

Alphonse walked down the well-traveled path, arriving at his destination before the sun could settle overhead. It was a small hill overlooking the area. At the very top were patches of thinly scattered grass and a mysterious black door. Alphonse continued to walk toward his destination, now in sight. He quietly gulped. There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in his step.

“Seven long days...”

Alphonse had been alone for so long that it'd become a habit of his to talk to himself, but he couldn't help it. His chest was full of expectation. After yesterday's party, he hadn't had a single thing to eat. Every ounce of his body was crying for what was beyond the door. Once he arrived at the black object, he immediately opened it and stepped inside. The familiar bell rang out once again.

“Welcome!”

“Yo, Master! Get me some curry rice, please! A large order at that!” Alphonse could barely contain himself, almost interrupting the other man to call out the name of his beloved meal.

He was offered all manner of dishes at the party yesterday, but curry rice was not among them. Of course it wasn't; the meal didn't exist in the Duchy's capital. And so Alphonse's excitement reached a boiling point and finally exploded.

“Aye, you got it. Hold on just a minute.” As usual, the master chuckled at Alphonse's impatience and went to the kitchen in the back. The former admiral made his way to one of the seats in the restaurant.

“Curses. Is it ready yet? How much longer must I wait?!”

Incapable of waiting out his empty stomach and expectations, he grew

impatient after only a few minutes. Curry rice was food for the soul. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he stayed alive just so that he could eat it again. That was how special it was to him. Nobody else felt as strongly about the meal as he did.

Alphonse cared not about any of the sounds around him. The only thing that mattered right now was the curry rice.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Here's your order of curry rice."

And so after the longest five minutes of Alphonse's life, the master set down a large plate of curry rice in front of him.

The huge helping of white rice was topped with brown curry sauce that had large chunks in it. Beside the plate was the small pot filled with bright red fukujinzuke, finely chopped pickled vegetables. Nearby was a glass cup filled with lemon water along with a silver pitcher. Alphonse's silver spoon reflected the illumination dropping down from the ceiling lights.

Mm, I knew it. Curry rice truly is bliss itself.

The dining table was set. It would be a feast the likes of which he only had once every seven days. The spicy, stunning aroma wafting up into his nostrils from the plate in front of him landed a direct attack on his stomach. In preparation for this meal, Alphonse had avoided eating anything since early in the morning.

"Yes, yes. That's what I'm talking about," he muttered.

Alphonse took the glistening spoon in hand and smiled with glee. He immediately dipped it into the mountain of curry and scooped out a spoonful. The curry sauce sitting atop the white rice was filled with meat and vegetables. The visual contrast of the white rice and brown curry sauce was like a work of art. The spoon had effectively become a miniature replica of the larger plate in front of him. Alphonse brought it to his mouth and chewed in silence.

Mm, it's so spicy!

The first thing Alphonse felt was heat. In the Duchy, spices were extremely valuable and hard to come by. And yet, this dish used them plentifully, allowing it to reach the perfect level of spiciness. It was this heat that assaulted Alphonse

from all sides. The first time he ate it, he was unprepared for the kickback. Now that he was more intimately familiar with curry, Alphonse took his time chewing and experiencing all the flavors it had to offer.

Each bite of white rice revealed a unique sweetness. The greasy squares of stewed pork were tender, almost as if they might melt in his mouth. And then there were the two types of oranie incorporated into the dish. One of them had been melted into the curry sauce itself, adding a savory quality to the overall flavor profile. The other was oranie added after the fact, allowed to maintain its original form. This one ended up soaking up the flavor of the curry while also keeping its own sweetness by being cooked over fire.

Those weren't the only flavors he experienced, either. There were the cobbler's tubers, a vegetable Alphonse was not familiar with from his time in the Duchy. According to some of the other customers, it was a well-known food in the Empire. These tubers and the orange karoots soaked up the spicy flavor of the curry. They also had a soft texture. All these different tastes melted into one in his mouth.

"Mm, truly delicious." Alphonse was overwhelmed with emotion as he spoke aloud.

Now that he thought about it, the restaurant had changed quite a bit since he first discovered it. The master that used to run the place was no longer present, and various other little things had changed as well. But one of the few things that stayed the same was the amazing taste of the curry. He would take one bite, then the next, and each taste would only make him hungrier still. By the end, he would grab a bit of fukujinzuke and lemon water, dumping it all into his stomach. As he felt the curry warm him up from the inside, beads of sweat ran down his chin. Yet his hands never stopped moving. They couldn't stop moving. His spoon would scoop up more curry and deliver it on an express trip to his mouth over and over again.

That was what curry rice was. It was the ultimate fusion of spiciness and a multitude of other savory flavors combined into one, filling his stomach like no other. It was that feeling that led Alphonse to fall in love with this particular dish.

Long ago, the previous master of the restaurant told Alphonse that curry rice was one of the most popular dishes in the other world. He could see how that was the case given how good it was. Whether it be the fruits from trees or the salted meats and fish he normally ate, none of it could compare to this.

Come to think of it, I've probably eaten here some thousand times, and yet I still can't get enough of this curry.

Perhaps because he knew this was his final time visiting the Restaurant to Another World, Alphonse began to grow nostalgic. In retrospect, he wasn't sure whether it was good luck or bad that he had washed ashore this island as the lone survivor of a shipwreck. Alphonse had fought against the terrifying monsters of the island, all the while exploring its every nook and cranny. It was by pure luck that he had stumbled across the strange black door and first visited the restaurant. Due to his ongoing struggles with the creatures of the island, he had only eaten a handful of fruit over the three days leading up to this discovery. The moment he found out he was in an eatery, he immediately told the master he had money and asked him to serve whatever he had. Since Alphonse had no need of his money, he simply tossed it at the man running the restaurant, who responded to him as such.

"Hm... Well, I guess I can whip you up some curry pretty quickly. That okay with you?"

And so the master presented the former admiral with a plate of curry and rice. Alphonse was thirty-five years old when he came face to face with the strange food. He was tired and running on an empty stomach, and so the spiciness of the dish served as a shock to his appetite, causing him to wolf down the food. He remembered it as if it were just yesterday.

Alphonse ate so much curry that day that he was on the verge of bursting.

After that fateful day, he had visited the restaurant over a thousand times. Alphonse would spend six days surviving the harsh conditions of the island in anticipation of the seventh. Being able to eat curry rice on the Day of Saturday became his singular objective.

"As I thought, curry rice is true happiness. Teriyaki, Omelet Rice, and Pork Cutlet Rice Bowl know not of what they speak."

As he let out a satisfied sigh, Alphonse recalled an old memory from years ago.

He once got into an argument with three fellow regulars. There was Teriyaki, a swordsman from the Western Continent with skills equal to his own. Then there was the terrifying monster, the lizardman hero named Omelet Rice. Last but not least was Pork Cutlet Rice Bowl, a powerful demon warrior with a dignified body and the head of a lion. The argument they engaged in was so fierce that all of them were nearly banned from the restaurant permanently. The four regulars apologized profusely to the master. While it was a happy memory for him now, Alphonse hadn't changed his opinion since then.

No matter what the other customers said, the best way to eat rice was with curry. That was the simple, unmoving truth of the matter.

"Whew..."

Alphonse cleared his enormous plate in a paltry ten minutes and let out a satisfied sigh laced with the scent of curry.

"Hah, fast as ever, I see." One of Alphonse's acquaintances, Pork Loin Cutlet, had been watching him.

"Hmph. I was simply hungry is all," Alphonse answered. "Master, seconds, please. Make it a large."

He gave the master his usual serious look and wiped the curry sauce from his mouth with his moist towel.

"You never change. You're obsessed with curry rice. How do you not grow bored of it?"

"As if that were possible! Curry rice is filled with limitless potential. And you're one to talk. Why not give a plate of pork loin cutlet curry a try? It's quite delicious, my friend. Much better than eating it by itself."

With his stomach full, Alphonse turned his attention to joking with Pork Loin Cutlet.

As far as the former admiral was concerned, the restaurant's food could be divided into two categories. Things that went well with curry and things that did

not. Any kind of fried food or cutlet typically went well with curry. Pork loin cutlet, in particular, went splendidly with the spicy food. He knew this for a fact.

“I refuse. Pork cutlets go best with cutlet sauce and beer. This is an unbending truth of the universe.” The old diviner shook his head like the most stubborn person on the planet.

“Hmph, I see you’re as hardheaded as ever. Anyway, has anything interesting happened recently?” Alphonse asked Pork Loin Cutlet without digging too deeply.

And so the two men shared words as always. This was the only place in the world where people of different nations could peacefully converse like this. Truth be told, this too was one of the reasons that Alphonse fell in love with Nekoya.

Given where he normally lived, even just three days ago he would never be able to experience the second plate of curry rice he was currently devouring.

“Master, you have my gratitude. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

With his second plate of curry rice resting soundly at the bottom of his stomach, Alphonse stood from his seat and gave his final thanks to the master. These words came from deep within his heart. If this restaurant hadn’t been there when he needed it, he most certainly would have died many moons ago. His words were fueled by this truth.

“Oh? Yeah, of course. You’re very much welcome. We’ll be looking forward to your next visit.”

The master seemed somewhat surprised by Alphonse’s words but nonetheless returned them in kind. He knew that the man had been a regular since his grandfather ran the restaurant, but as far as he could recall, this might have been the first time he’d ever been thanked face to face. Since Alphonse had paid for all his meals years in advance, he normally just stood up and left without saying anything once he finished.

“One day, I’ll be back.”

Thoughts of the future ran through Alphonse’s mind as he felt a tinge of

sadness hit him. He left the restaurant behind, wondering when he'd next be able to visit, if ever.

A brief period of time had passed since the former admiral's final visit to Nekoya. He watched the island he lived on for many years grow more and more distant, letting out a sigh.

"Admiral Flugel, is everything all right, sir?"

The noble officer nearby checked in on Alphonse. The man standing nervously before him was none other than Alphonse Flugel, once said to be the strongest admiral in all of the Duchy. Some twenty years ago, on his way to the Western Continent while serving as a bodyguard for a merchant ship, the admiral was forced into battle against the lord of the ocean, the kraken. In exchange for saving the merchant ship, the legendary admiral went down with his own and had never been seen again. The deserted island he washed ashore was far away from any ship routes, forcing him to survive on his own for all these years. The noble was incredibly surprised to find him all the way out here.

An average person would have long since succumbed to despair and either ended things on their own or fallen to any number of illnesses and injuries. But this man had survived. He defeated the vicious beasts of the island, abiding by the laws of the wild, and survived for twenty years all on his own.

Damaged in a rough storm out on the ocean, the noble officer's military ship had been pushed off course. Looking to repair the ship, he and the rest of his crew decided to set anchor at an island nearby. It was three days later that they ran into Alphonse, who at the time looked like some kind of wild man. The repairs finished an additional three days later, and after letting the former admiral take one last stroll around his home of twenty years, they boarded their ship and went on their way. They were now headed for the Duchy, their beloved homeland.

"Now that I think about it, waiting for seven thousand days in a row is completely different than waiting for seven days a thousand times, huh?" Alphonse whispered as he watched the island grow distant.

"Excuse me? What do you mean, sir?" the officer asked.

“It’s nothing. Just an old man’s musings is all.” Alphonse chuckled at the officer who clearly had no idea what he was talking about.

I wonder if there’s a black door somewhere in the Duchy.

Alphonse heard from the other customers that the black doors appeared all over the world in different places. Given that so many of them were from completely different continents, this made sense. That meant it was entirely possible that his beloved Duchy might be home to a door or two as well.

I’ll have to do some digging around.

Either way, Alphonse was now over fifty years old. His role as admiral had long since passed, and he heard that his position as head of the Flugel family now belonged to his son. This meant that after returning home, he’d have all the time in the world. He decided to dedicate some of it to trying to reunite with his beloved curry rice.

If I remember correctly, one of the new regulars was a knight of the Duchy.

Recently, Teriyaki had brought a knight dressed in what seemed to be a Duchy uniform to the restaurant. The man was in love with the kind of fried shripe one would put atop curry. Alphonse now had the confirmation he needed. There was a door in the Duchy. He simply had to find it.

Time to do some searching once I get home.

The military ship continued to rock back and forth on its way to the Duchy, carrying a newly determined Alphonse.

Three months later, Alphonse arrived at his destination. It was a little cabin out in the wildlands, outside of the capital of the Duchy. He traveled there by horse.

“I knew it. There it is.”

Despite being free of the island, Alphonse still often spoke to himself. He stared at the incongruous black door set into the cabin.

The former admiral was dressed completely differently than he was on his last visit. While his rapier and sword breaker were still present, his clothes were

fresh and clean, and his brand new shoes shone in the light. Alphonse's beard had been trimmed by the finest barber in the Duchy, and his hair was cut short.

He looked as a noble and former admiral of the Duchy should. The reason he had no bodyguards accompanying him was because he had long since retired to a quiet life.

"To think it was this close," he murmured.

It had taken Alphonse about a month to reach the capital of the Duchy. From there, it took an additional two months of talking to traveling halflings and following the trail of fellow regulars before finally getting the info he needed. Alphonse excitedly opened the door, the sound of a familiar bell ringing in his ears.

"Welcome... Oh? Long time no see, Alphonse!" the master said.

"Indeed, it has been quite some time! But first, get me some curry rice! Right this instant! I haven't had any for three whole months, dammit!"

And thus, Alphonse shouted out his order once again.

Chapter 17:

Pudding à la Mode The Duchy was one of the most powerful nations on the Eastern Continent. Its history was long and vast, stretching back to a kingdom of old that was destroyed in ancient times.

In that powerful nation lived a princess named Victoria. She was thirty-six years old and the older sister of the duke. Victoria was unmarried, and those around her said she would likely remain that way for the rest of her days.

The reason for this was tied to Victoria's birth; she was a changeling.

Changelings were children who, despite being born of two humans, entered the world with half-elven traits. Under normal circumstances, one of the parents would have to be an elf for this to be possible, making this one of the world's many strange phenomena. One theory brought forth by scholars was that elf or half-elf blood that had found its way into a bloodline some thousand years prior randomly emerged, but the truth of the matter was still unknown to all.

Those who were born as half-elves or changelings could not hope to live normal lives. The reasons for this were simple. Half-elves possessed the same strong magical power that elves had, as well as the life energy that humans had. They were also capable of living for hundreds of years at a time. So while it did vary from individual to individual, most half-elves looked like they were in their early teens until they were a century old. They were beings that defied human knowledge.

Never mind elven society, half-elves were often treated as aliens in the human world. It didn't matter who they were born to; they were outcasts.

As such, their options in life were inherently limited by their birth. They could choose to cut themselves off from the world and serve a god or perhaps utilize their long life spans and inhuman magical power to become sorcerers. Other options included becoming mercenaries or adventurers, for whom ability was everything, or moving to one of the handful of small half-elf villages across the land. Either way, they were incapable of simply walking a normal path through life.

Victoria chose the sorcerer's path.

By the time she turned twenty-five years of age, it had become clear that despite being a princess of the Duchy, she was not human. In the ten years that passed since she was 15, her appearance had not changed at all. And so the princess, wanting to make use of her immense magical powers, went to the then-duke, her father, and appealed to him. She wanted to pursue the path of a sorcerer.

This was when she discovered that she was a genius.

It took not but three months before her own skills surpassed those of her teacher. She then went on to surpass the best sorcerer in all the Duchy, the court's head sorcerer, in only a year. This was an incredible feat on its own but even more amazing considering that the Duchy was considered the greatest of magical nations on the Eastern Continent.

It was then that Victoria's magical prowess was recognized. Ten years ago, she became the pupil of the greatest sorcerer in the Kingdom, Sage Altorius, one of the heroes who helped to slay the demon god. After spending only eight years dedicated to her studies, Victoria unlocked the greatest secrets of magic.

And so two years ago, Victoria told her master, the Sage Altorius, that she wished to walk her own path. She departed from the Kingdom and returned home to the Duchy, where she was given limitless research funds in exchange for promising to remain in the shadows. That was how she gained the nickname, "The Witch Princess of the Duchy." She spent her days in her room researching magic.

However, even the Witch Princess took breaks every now and then... Specifically, once every seven days.

Victoria's personal room, also known as the "lab," was sealed off so that nobody but her could enter. It was nothing like one might expect of a princess's room. Instead, it was filled with all sorts of suspicious-looking vials and magical items. Quite frankly, it resembled a fairy tale witch's house, if anything. It was in this room that Victoria had holed up, reading a magic book the ancient elves had left behind. The elves of old were said to have had magic far beyond that of

her time.

It's still too early, she thought.

Rather than wear a decorative gown befitting the princess of a great nation, Victoria instead wore a simple dress that prioritized ease of movement. She lightly rubbed her stomach over the fabric and waited for the time to come.

Victoria continued to glance at the complicated magic circle on the floor. To be more precise, it was a summoning circle for doors to another world, one of the most complicated of its kind. Creating one required precise knowledge, incredible magical skills, and control.

Mastering it was a difficult feat for even a pure elf. In fact, only two magic circles of its kind existed in all the world. One of them was right in front of Victoria, and the other was the one her master and the world's greatest sage, Altorius, had made. The magic circle designed to call forth a very specific object was currently activated and doing its job.

The black door with the cat picture appeared over it.

Normally at just past noon, Victoria would have already gone out. However, her stomach was still rather full. Earlier in the day, her younger brother had invited her to join his family for a meal, likely because he knew that Victoria wasn't particularly fond of putting herself out in front of people. Since this particular meal was a personal affair, he was clearly thinking of his older sister. She appreciated the gesture.

The problem was that it was a special day. Victoria had been looking forward to swinging by her special place since early in the morning, so she couldn't help but feel like her chance had been ripped out from under her. Of course, her little brother knew nothing of the door's existence, which made feeling that way silly to begin with. Victoria was more than aware that none of this was his fault.

After a brief period of reading her book, the Witch Princess finally stood up, convinced that she could probably do with something light. She stepped into the magic circle and placed her hand on the door. The ringing of the bell, an old elf relic, announced her arrival at the restaurant.

“Welcome!” the master called.

“Hello,” she answered.

Victoria exchanged brief words with the master of the restaurant, someone she had now known for eight years, ever since Altorius first brought her here. She took a seat.

“Here you are. Ice water and a menu.”

Victoria thanked him and immediately turned to the dessert page.

Maybe I'll just get a dessert today...

Meals here were to be eaten in silence and with respect. Victoria couldn't help but feel this way as a citizen of the Duchy. People in her homeland often said that “changelings were not to speak of government matters.” This carried over to how she handled herself in day-to-day matters. She looked at the menu and made sure not to interact with the other customers. Victoria paid them no mind.

That's right. She paid them no mind. For example, she paid no mind to the imperial princess eating a parfait who was supposed to have started treatment for her illness three months ago. She paid no mind to the Monastery of Light followers, one of them even a half-elf like herself, who happily chatted amongst themselves while eating sweets. She paid no mind to her own master, who would appear at lunchtime, digging into a pork loin cutlet and some beer. She paid no mind to the former admiral of the Duchy eating curry rice, a man who supposedly died twenty years ago in a vicious battle with a kraken.

Victoria visited the Restaurant to Another World with only one objective: to eat delicious food.

She made her decision.

“Pudding à la mode, please.”

She ordered only her most favorite of desserts.

The master nodded. “Aye, you got it. Hang on just a minute.”

Victoria watched the master retreat to the kitchen in the back and cast her gaze down at the menu in front of her.

This is definitely my handwriting, she thought.

The dessert menu was in a beautifully written Eastern Continent script. Everything about the characters, including the little quirks, were exactly the same as Victoria's handwriting.

But I only gave him one...

The Witch Princess also looked at the characters on the normal menu that her master wrote long, long ago.

She collected her thoughts.

The other world was fairly technologically advanced. Just one glance at this small space said as much. The first time she came here, she was met with surprise after surprise.

Exactly eight years prior, Victoria became Altorius's pupil and went on to master all manner of difficult magic. Two years after she began studying under him, she became aware of the Restaurant to Another World. Altorius summoned the door with his magic and brought her with him inside.

"Welcome! So you're going to be writing the menu for me, young lady?"

At the time, Victoria looked quite a bit younger. The irony of course was that the master was actually about the same age as her, not that he was aware of that. The Witch Princess nodded her head at the man. She'd heard the details from her master.

"Much appreciated," he said. "I'm not much for sweets."

This of course begged the question as to why the master would even think to add a dessert section to his restaurant's menu; something about his friend being a patissier or something. The main problem was that the master was a resident of the other world, meaning he couldn't read or write in Victoria's world's language. This inspired Altorius to go to his new pupil Victoria, an incredibly talented sorcerer who loved sweets more than anybody he knew. He ordered her to try each new confection and write the names and descriptions for them in the language of the Eastern Continent.

"Again, thanks a bunch. Here's a pen and some paper. And..."

Apparently, Sage Altorius and the master had already settled things between themselves. The middle-aged human man handed her a useful otherworldly pen that didn't require an ink jar and some white, thin but durable paper. He retreated to the back but quickly came out again holding something in his hands.

"Try this one, first. I heard from the old man that you're big on egg-based sweets, right?"

This was the first thing she ever ate at the Restaurant to Another World...

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Here you are, custard à la mode."

It was the same hypnotizing confection that she'd eaten eight years ago. The food was presented to her in a glass cup with a thin stem and a wide top. In the center was the soft yellow pudding drenched in brown sauce. Victoria licked her pink lips and grabbed the spoon off of the table.

Gotta save the best for last, she decided.

Victoria started by waging a full-fledged assault on the surrounding areas of the cup. She attacked the white cream decorating the edges of the pudding with her spoon. It was the very same soft and sweet white cream used in the parfaits and cakes served at the restaurant. She scooped it up with her spoon, enjoying how fragile it was to the touch.

She then switched to the small fork on the table and reached for the fruits next to the pudding. According to the master, the half-peeled apple was meant to look like a rabbit. It was as crunchy as expected, refreshingly sweet and tart. Meanwhile, the neighboring orange sauce added a whole new level of sweetness to the apple.

The sweet fruit was very similar to a southern one she'd eaten many times on the Western Continent with her master when they traveled there via magic circle. Since it was quick to rot, one didn't see it very often in the Duchy. She quietly enjoyed the different flavors of fruit blending together in her mouth.

Before getting to her main objective, Victoria next targeted the ice cream. She enjoyed the crisp, cold sweetness sitting on the side of the cup. Each scoop had a sweetness to her liking, and they were all delicious in their own ways, but they

didn't stand a chance against the main draw in the center of the cup.

The time had come.

Victoria licked her lips multiple times, took a sip of cold water, and only after washing away the sweetness of the foods she'd just eaten did she begin her final attack on the fortress of deliciousness in front of her. It went without saying, but custard was the true star of pudding à la mode. It was the first dessert that Victoria had tried at the restaurant, and it was the one otherworldly confection that refused to move from its number one spot.

The Witch Princess pressed her shining silver spoon into the egg-colored pudding covered in brown sauce. In response, it jiggled ever so slightly, allowing the spoon into its gentle domain of tastiness. She then raised it back up again, observing the tiny, brown and egg-colored hill sitting atop her silver spoon.



Into her mouth it went, rolling about on top of her tongue.

The rich and sweet flavors of egg and milk spread across her tongue, accompanied by its unique mouthfeel and the sweet but slightly bitter flavor of the brown sauce. They complemented each other beautifully, with the former gently accepting the other into its soft arms and the latter bringing out the flavor of the pudding even further. It was the perfect marriage of elements.

Victoria found herself utterly charmed by the flavors melting away in her mouth.

This truly is the most perfect of combinations.

It was during this time, and this time only, that Victoria felt grateful for being a half-elf. If she had been born a human, she never would have thought to become a sorcerer, which meant she likely never would have stumbled her way into this restaurant. On the flip side, if she were born an elf, she'd never have been able to eat custard à la mode even if she did reach the restaurant. After all, elves hated all foods made from animals.

Victoria was a half-elf sorcerer. It was for that very reason that she was able to be where she was, enjoying custard to her heart's content. The Witch Princess didn't intend on letting this chance meeting go to waste, and she would do whatever it took to make sure she could continue to eat this delectable treat. The magic circle in her lab that summoned the door to the Restaurant to Another World was testament to her determination.

Spoonful by spoonful, Victoria continued to enjoy her dessert. She was as careful as could be so that she might stretch out the experience as long as possible. Sadly, all good things eventually came to an end. The spoon made but a light tapping noise as Victoria set it down on the table. The cup in front of her was empty but her stomach was full. She let out a satisfied sigh. After consulting with her stomach, she decided that she only needed one for today.

"Master, the check, please. Also..."

"Aye. The usual, right?"

Victoria nodded. "Yes, exactly."

The master knew her quite well by this point, so he nodded and grabbed something out of the fridge.

“Here you go. Make sure you eat it today, all right?”

With that, the master handed her a small box with an illustration of a winged puppy on it. Inside were four glass jars of pudding, along with a strangely cold object that didn’t melt like ice. The special pudding was made by the patissier upstairs, and she always ordered it to go.

“Understood.”

The master told her the same thing every time, and she always nodded her head in response. That said, she was lying. She was incapable of eating all of this in one sitting, especially if it meant living out the next six days without pudding. She was well aware that because of the way the custard was made, it spoiled fast. Victoria took steps to ensure that would not happen.

“I’ll be back.”

“Yup! Thanks as always!”

Victoria opened the door as she listened to the master’s words and exited into her room.

“...Now then,” she said.

The Witch Princess knew exactly what needed to be done upon her return. She immediately exited her lab and made a beeline for her bedroom, a wonderfully ornate space fitting for the princess of a great nation. Victoria then grabbed the box sitting next to her pillow. At first glance, it looked like a jewelry box, but once she opened it, the truth became clear. There was nothing inside of it except for cold air. She carefully placed each of the four jars into the box. This jewelry box combined two different spells: one designed to prevent rotting and another that continuously blasted cold, wintry air. Victoria specifically developed this contraption so that she could enjoy her pudding for as long as possible.

Victoria giggled to herself as she closed the cold container. Now she’d be able to enjoy her beloved pudding once every couple of days.

The Witch Princess of the Duchy was known for being aloof and inexpressive, much like a doll. This smile of hers was as important as it was rare. She only let it show when she was truly filled with joy, to express the fact that she never felt pity for herself due to her birth.

It was a smile that expressed that, if anything, she was incredibly grateful for being born as she was.

Chapter 18:

Hamburger On the outskirts of a middle-of-nowhere town in a small nation, Jack ran along gleefully, his ears filled with the sounds of the coins rattling in his pouch.

“Heh heh, I finally got my hands on nine copper coins!”

He had earned this money bit by bit, helping out around the house, using a machete to take out the giant rats terrorizing the cattle and plants, and even guiding visitors to the local inn. It took him seven days to save up enough coins so that he could go out to eat *that* particular thing.

It was just before noon. Jack always made it a point to head out before lunch. As always, the usual pair were already there to meet him.

“Yo, Jack. Glad you made it,” said one of them.

Greeting him was Kento, the son of a sorcerer who lived in town.

The other added, “Thank goodness. If you were any later, we were gonna have to go without you!”

The second person to greet him was Terry, the third son of the mayor. He was one year older than the two boys. In this town in the middle of nowhere, these three troublemakers were the only ones who knew about “that place.”

Jack comically shrugged in response to Terry’s words. “Whoops! That would’ve sucked. Well then, let’s get goin’!”

“Yup.”

“All right.”

And so the three youngsters headed to their destination. It was an old well just outside of town that had long been out of use. When they were much younger, the three boys explored the well and stumbled upon that certain something.

“Kento, be careful,” Terry cautioned. “You know you can be an oaf sometimes.”

“I know, I know! Look, I only fell that one time. You don’t gotta keep bugging me about it every single time we go!”

The boys bantered back and forth while climbing down the rope and deep into the well. At the very bottom of it, they found...

“All right, I’m opening it!” Terry said.

“Got it.”

“Okay.”

Once every seven days, a door to another world appeared at the bottom of the well. Terry stepped ahead of his friends and turned the golden knob, opening the entrance to the world beyond.

“Welcome!” said the master. “Sit wherever you’d like.”

The master was already in the process of bringing some other regulars to their table: a tray full of small people that he carried by hand.

“Thank you!”

“All right.”

“Okay!”

The three boys were already used to the way things worked, so after quickly responding to the master, they found their way to one of the open tables and sat down.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. What’ll it be?” The master quickly returned to take their order, and the boys responded in tandem.

“The hamburger set with a cola!” the boys said in unison.

“Aye, coming right up.” The master did his best to try not to laugh at the synchronized boys and left for the kitchen.

“I can’t wait!” said Kento.

“Totally,” said Jack. “The food we normally eat ain’t got nothing on this.”

Terry nodded. “Yeah, even the food at my place doesn’t come close.”

The boys wiped their hands with the hot towels and looked around the

restaurant after briefly discussing the deliciousness of the hamburger.

“You know what, there sure are a lot of other races that come here.”

“I mean, I get that they all come from that door, but from where?”

“It’s super weird. Does that mean our world is full of other kinds of people like the ones we see in here?”

This topic came up whenever they visited the restaurant. The boys couldn’t help but be astounded by how small the town they lived in was compared to the vast world, of which they knew little. The magic door to the Restaurant to Another World supposedly appeared all across Jack’s world. The people who used said door weren’t just humans. Nekoya was visited by all manner of beings.

There was an elf quietly but deliciously enjoying a plate of noodles topped with fermented bean sauce. They’d never seen anyone but that elf order it before.

Then there was the beautiful, silver-haired, half-elf sorcerer who was always eating a yellow food topped with beautifully arranged fruits and some kind of white stuff.

There was even a red-faced dwarf drowning himself in alcohol and all sorts of fish. He wore a giant axe on his back, much bigger than any of the ones the lumberjacks from the village used.

While they didn’t appear to be regulars, every now and then the boys saw barefooted halflings in the restaurant. The childlike people would always make a ruckus, excitedly filling their stomachs with all manner of foods.

These races weren’t all that surprising to Jack and the others. They’d heard of them before, and other than the elves that never left the forest, they’d even seen a few in person as adventures or travelers visiting their village. However, the Restaurant to Another World had plenty of stranger customers.

There was an expressionless lizard man digging his spoon into a plate of yellow omelet rice, topped with the same red sauce that hamburgers used.

Meanwhile, the legion of little people from before were digging into an

absurdly large bread-like food topped with an array of sauces.

Next to them was another group of little people, though these were winged. They appeared to be obeying the orders of their haughty queen, taking bits and pieces off of some kind of sweet, creamy food.

Sitting close by was a beautiful woman with brown, tanned skin, hungrily eating a meat dish with boiled eggs in it. While this by itself wasn't strange, one glance at everything below her waist was enough to understand. Where her legs would normally be was instead the bottom half of a red snake. The woman was a monster called a lamia.

These were the kinds of races that Jack and his friends had only ever heard about in fairy tales.

"Do you think the rumor about there being a dragon who comes here at night is true?" Jack asked.

"Oh, you mean the story that old diviner told us? Nah, he's gotta be bluffing."

"I wonder. I heard that sometimes even vampires show up here," Terry said.

The three boys continued their casual chatter over the restaurant's customers. Because the three were born in the same town and were around the same age, they acted much like siblings with one another. As they continued their light conversation, the master returned holding a tray with white plates on it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Here are your hamburger sets."

The master was carrying the one meal that the boys just couldn't get enough of.

"Heck yeah!" Kento cheered.

"It looks sooo good."

"Well, we can't eat it anywhere else, after all!"

The boys excitedly took the plates and placed them down on the table.

The first thing that drew their attention were the pale yellow french fries made from fried cobbler's tubers. The seasoning on them was kept simple; just

a dash of salt. They were hot to the touch and tasted great as is but were also delicious if topped with some of the red sauce from the corner of the plate.

Placed inconspicuously next to the plate was a glass cup filled with a black juice called cola. Sticking out of it was a mysterious tube made from neither wood nor metal. The iced cola drink initially had a layer of brown foam sitting above it, but much like ale, this eventually dissipated.

Finally came the main dish, seated neatly right next to the cobbler's tubers; the hamburger. Sandwiching the meat, vegetables, and various sauces were two slices of lightly toasted white bread with some kind of delightfully scented seeds scattered over them. As far as the three boys were concerned, this was the best food at Nekoya.

"Whoaaaa! This looks so dang good!"

"All right! Then let's get to grubbin'!"

"Terry, you're drooling," Jack pointed out.

The aroma coming from the french fries and freshly cooked hamburgers was enough to send the boys into a tizzy. The handy thing about hamburgers was that they didn't require utensils to eat, so the boys simply grabbed them with their hands and took a bite.

"DELICIOUS!" cried the boys, their voices overlapping.

The aroma of the lightly toasted surface of the white bread was incredibly appetizing, and its seeds gave it a tantalizing mix of textures. The red vegetable cut into round slices had a mellow sweetness and sourness. The sweetness of the similarly sliced, fried oranie melted away in their mouths.

The thin, green vegetable beneath the meat was crunchy and felt great to bite into. Meanwhile, on top of the meat was some kind of pickled vegetable that really accented the whole dish. As for the colorful sauces, Jack and his friends tried out all three and found that the yellow sauce was spicy, the red sauce sour, and the white sauce a more gentle kind of sour. These three sauces combined with the melted cheese on top of the burger to bring out the flavor of the meat.

Indeed, hamburgers were simply a vessel by which to eat meat. Despite the

use of multiple ingredients, the flavor of the meat was still the strongest of all. It was this overwhelming flavor that washed over the three boys. The finely minced meat was fried into something more solid, somehow remaining tender to the touch. One bite into it was enough to make it overflow with flavor.

All that had been used to flavor it was salt and some light seasoning so as to not hurt the taste of the tender, juicy meat. That was enough to bring out the inherent flavor of the burger. The bread, vegetables, and cheese were all there to help better draw out its amazing taste.

After initially yelling out in tandem, the other boys gave Jack a sidelong glance as he dug into his hamburger. They then reached for their set menus.

“Mm, this is super good. I wonder how he makes it?” Kento took a sip of his cola and tilted his head to one side. The black drink was foamy like ale, but it tasted nothing like alcohol. Apparently, it was filled with all kinds of ingredients, which eventually led it to its sweet and refreshing flavor.

According to Kento’s master, near a volcano somewhere was a lake by some hot springs that produced foamy water. Was that what the restaurant was using? While Kento was younger than the other two boys, his status as the son of a sorcerer meant he had the gift of knowledge. The foamy cola in front of him piqued his curiosity.

“Man, the fried stuff here must use some real good oil.”

Terry took a bite of one of his french fries after dipping it into the red sauce. The piping hot sticks melted away in his mouth. Terry had heard from his tutor that a long, long time ago, cobbler’s tubers were considered peasant food in the great Empire of the Eastern Continent. He had to believe that the reason these were so delicious was because the master used high-quality, clean oil.

As the third son of a noble family from the sticks, even he could tell that all manner of nobles in fine clothes frequented the restaurant. These were people who lived incredible lives. It only made sense that the master would use ingredients that outclassed even the finest of goods the capital city had to offer. This made it all the more puzzling that the prices were so affordable. Even commoner children like Kento and Jack could afford the food.

It wasn’t long until the three boys wiped their plates clean and quietly

enjoyed their colas. After finishing their meals, they always made sure to order something else.

“I think I’m gonna get some more fries.” Terry announced his intentions while wiping some red sauce from his mouth.

“Then I’m gonna get another cola. I still want more.” Kento held up his now empty cup.

“I want another hamburger!” Jack licked the sauce off of his index finger.

“Aye, you got it.”

The master couldn’t help but chuckle at the three boys. They reminded him of a young couple, about the same age, who came to Nekoya to eat hot dogs.

I haven’t seen those two in years, he thought to himself. I hope they’re doing well.

The middle-aged man reminisced while he went into the kitchen to whip up the boys’ orders.

Jack moaned, “Phew, I’m full as all heck.”

“It was sooo good!”

“Yup. There isn’t anything like the food here.”

With their plates now completely empty, the boys stood up from their chairs, satisfied.

“Old man, we’re leaving the money right here!” They placed down enough copper coins to pay for everything, opened the front door, and exited out into the well.

“All right! Now that we’re nice and full, let’s head back!” said Terry.

“Mmhm. Special training waits for nobody!”

Jack nodded. “That’s right. The day’s almost here.”

The three boys had made a promise to one another. Once they all turned fifteen and were recognized as young men, they would leave town to become

adventurers. After having spent so much time going to the tiny Restaurant to Another World, they found their curiosities piqued by the greater world outside of their village. They were resolute about doing this.

“Ah, but it kinda sucks we won’t be able to eat hamburgers anymore,” said Kento.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” Jack said. “But hey, the world is big and stuff, right? There might be even more delicious foods out there!”

“I guess you’re right...” Kento brightened. “Plus, we could always come back to town on occasion. We’ll be traveling together, after all!”

The boys climbed out of the well while chatting about their futures. Even if it didn’t seem like anything special, the time they spent together like this was irreplaceable. Eventually, that time would come to an end, the boys would become men, and the day of their journey would arrive.

Chapter 19:

Coffee Float In the southern region of the Western Continent resided the Sand Nation, a country in which magic flourished.

Approximately half of the Sand Nation's territory was a vast desert that could bear no vegetation or support human life. In terms of area, the Sand Nation was larger than any country across both continents, though its actual population was about equal to that of some of the other nations on the Western Continent. For citizens of the Sand Nation, their only option was to build their towns and cities next to the ocean, close to rivers, or by the occasional oasis.

Magic use was widespread out of necessity. It was a special technique used by the elves, who some thousand years ago were removed as the rulers of the world by a fast-moving plague. Magic was one of the few ways that the frail humans could fight against the great Mother Nature.

In the case of the Sand Nation, much harsher living conditions compared to the other countries of the world made magic all the more important. There were no trees in the desert that could be used for fires and no landmarks one could use to travel through across the desert accurately. The likelihood of locating water while in the desert, the difference between life and death, was thin. The ability to use magic made many of these problems easier to contend with, if not obsolete. Magic also gave people the ability to deal with the dangerous monsters in the area, as well as the undead born of fallen travelers. (In the other world, those who passed on and were not properly buried became undead beings who brought death to those around them.) In the Sand Nation, sorcerers were both in high demand and high in quantity, quality notwithstanding. Caravans crossing the desert always hired multiple magic-users to accompany them, and all nobles were assumed to have magical knowledge. As such, it didn't take long for "that" to spread throughout the nation.

The sun in the sky blazed down with intense heat upon those who walked beneath it. Hoods were raised. A young sorcerer quietly prepared his goods in his shaded stall. Cafa was the Sand Nation's most common drink, but he was

making something altogether different. The young man took the cafa beans and ground them into powder, put it into a bag, and dropped it into a copper pot filled with boiling water. The cafa essence released from the powder dissolved into the hot water, darkening its color. He then mixed sugar into the pot, stirring it all together. Sugar was quite cheap for citizens of the Sand Nation compared to elsewhere in the world, thanks to local trade with nearby island and desert nations.

Up until this point, the young man had made one of the traditional forms of cafa.

It was from here on out that sorcerer did something entirely different. After finishing the process, sorcerers would then begin to cast a spell. This particular type of magic was considered one of the most fundamental arts that a sorcerer in the Sand Nation could learn, on par with fire-starting. It was the ability to control cold air. While the spell wasn't nearly strong enough to freeze an enemy in battle, it was perfect for cooling objects.

The young sorcerer cast his spell on the copper pot, watching as it and the cafa inside began to chill. After making sure that both were sufficiently cold, he took a sip of the cafa to confirm it was finished. The cool fluid ran down his throat smoothly, completely unlike the hot version of the drink. Its refreshing, sweet, and bitter taste spread throughout his mouth. After checking his product, the young man licked the remaining cafa off of his lips and raised his voice.

"Come one, come all! I got ice-cold, sweet cafa here! It's nice and refreshing!"

Passersby began to gather around the young man's stall in droves.

"Let me get a cup!"

"Me, too!"

"Lemme get one!"

The orders came one after the other, none of the customers paying any mind to the hot cafa they normally drank. It made sense to drink something warm after the sun had set and the desert grew cool. But under the ever-watchful burning eye of the sun, a sweet cup of cold cafa felt like the nectar of the gods.

“Ahh!”

The man started to pour cold cafa into ceramic cups, and his customers took their time enjoying its refreshing taste.

“Whew!”

He could hear his customers making satisfied sounds. There was nothing like a cold cup of cafa during a hot day. Its flavor was on a whole different level.

Traditionally, cafa was drunk while hot because once it cooled down, its taste soured. That was common sense. This, however, was magically cooled cafa. It possessed a completely different, delicious flavor from naturally cooled cafa. When the citizens of the magically-inclined Sand Nation discovered this, cold cafa became just another one of their regular drinks.

Now multiple stalls sold cold cafa made in copper pots that wouldn't shatter even when cooled. They helped keep the citizens of the Sand Nation cool and refreshed.

Hmm, ice coffee sure got big... a passerby thought to himself, walking by the stall on his way out of the city.

The man rode a desert lizard, common to this region, and had a refined face, with beautiful bronze skin and deep, black hair. He was extremely well built, wearing clothes embroidered with fine silk from the Ocean Nation. The young man looked beautiful, as if he should have been adorned with golden accessories and jewels.

The man's destination was close to the empty desert next to the capital city. There he would find a black door with the mark of a cat on it, sitting out in the open.

His name was Shareef, and he was a regular of the Restaurant to Another World who lived in the Sand Nation.

Shareef was also incredibly nervous.

I wonder if she's in today... he thought.

The sun had just passed its southern zenith and was slowly making its way west; the hottest time of day. This was usually when *she* came to the

restaurant. That was the only reason why Shareef dared to brave the scorching sun to visit the black door.

I suppose there's no point in fussing over it, is there? Shareef made peace with himself and opened the door. As usual, he was met with the sound of a bell ringing. He quickly surveyed the interior.

...Hmph, I guess she's not here today.

There were customers sitting inside, but the girl he was looking for was nowhere to be found. Shareef found himself simultaneously disappointed and relieved. He sat down in the back where he wouldn't stand out too much.

"Here's your menu."

As usual, the master brought the quiet young man a menu and a glass of water.

"Many thanks."

Shareef nodded in gratitude and looked down at the menu. It was open to the "drinks" section. After taking a look at his options, he placed his order.

"I'll have a coffee float with ice cream. Please make the cafa nice and sweet."

"Aye, you got it."

Shareef handed the master his menu and began to relax as he always did.

This restaurant remains as mysterious as ever.

It was five years ago, just after Shareef had come of age, that he discovered this place. He had treated himself to a night stroll through the castle town, and just happened to come upon the black door. His curiosity got the best of him, and he opened it up only to find an otherworldly restaurant just beyond.

The Restaurant to Another World. It was a place where citizens of Shareef's world all came together to enjoy strange, new cuisine. The young man dropped by every so often to enjoy the master's cooking. At most, he came by once a month, typically after the vicious sun had set. Or at least, that used to be the case.

Some months prior, Shareef visited the restaurant during the day on a whim,

when the sun was at its hottest. That trip would fundamentally change the way he interacted with Nekoya. From that point on, he visited once every seven days without fail, coming only when the sun was blazing down upon the citizens of the desert.

Shareef had found a reason to do so.

The ringing of the bell signified the arrival of yet another customer. Each time the sound found its way into Shareef's ears, he instinctively turned to look at the entrance.

That's not her...

Entering the restaurant was a familiar sorcerer. The half-elf was royalty from the Eastern Continent, and she once visited Shareef's father with her master before he came of age. He let out a sigh. While she was undoubtedly beautiful, she wasn't quite his type. Not to mention, despite her good looks, she was as old as his parents. That alone was enough to put him off.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Here's your coffee float."

As if noticing Shareef's expression darken, the master returned and placed the young man's glass cup down in front of him with a shining silver spoon.

Oh, well. It's not a complete loss, he thought. Not with this delicious treat, anyway.

Shareef collected himself and cast his gaze downward. Sitting before him was a glass cup filled with cold cafa and hard, transparent ice. Water droplets slid their way down the outsides of the cup. Sitting atop the ice at the top of the cup was a white mound...

Ice cream.

A bent tube stuck out of the cup, not unlike a snake of some kind, allowing for Shareef to drink without having to tilt the glass.

As a citizen of the Sand Nation and a lover of cafa, this was the one item on the menu of the Restaurant to Another World that truly called to him. First, Shareef put his lips on the tube and sucked ever so slightly.

Delicious.

The cold, sweet bitterness of the cafa flooded into his mouth. This variation on the popular drink had only just been discovered in Shareef's world. Initially, he had his servants use cooling magic to make the drink, and as time passed, it became fairly commonplace at the palace. Eventually, its popularity spread to the nobles, ultimately reaching even the commoners.

The hot coffee of the other world had a strong aroma and was undoubtedly delicious. That being said, cold cafa, with its perfect balance of sweetness and bitterness, was a blessing to those who called the hot desert nations their home. It was no wonder the citizens took to it so quickly. In fact, it was so popular that people had taken to describing unrelated things by saying they were "as different as cafa that's gone cold and cooled cafa."

Now then. Next is...

After taking multiple sips of his drink to make sure it wouldn't spill, Shareef finally turned his attention to the ice cream. He took his spoon and drove it into the white clump, its bright color contrasting sharply with the dark coffee. Shareef then brought the spoonful of frozen goodness to his mouth. Its sweet flavor and aroma immediately spread across his tongue and through his body. The frozen treat left behind a cold, sweet aftertaste of rich milk, eggs, and vanilla as it melted atop his tongue.

The ice cream here is just something else... Shareef thought to himself as he continued to indulge in the coffee float in front of him. The milky treat known as ice cream was slightly different from the icy confectionaries he normally ate. As the prince of the Sand Nation, Shareef was used to eating snacks of all kinds made from frozen fruit juices and sugar water. But they were neither as richly sweet nor soft as ice cream.

The prince was also aware that there was more to the coffee float than just the strong taste of vanilla; there were all sorts of other available flavors. During the summer months at the Restaurant to Another World, the master offered a wider variety of ice cream types than usual. There was the standard vanilla, brown chocolate with its unique sweetness, a variety of different fruit juices, and even a sweet flavor with alcohol in it. All of these were cheap and tasted

different, yet each and every one of them were delicious in their own ways. Shareef thoroughly enjoyed sampling them. As much as it pained him to admit it, even the Sand Nation, with its incredible magic and technology above and beyond that of the Kingdom of the Eastern Continent, could not recreate the tremendous flavor of ice cream.

On a whim, he once ordered some to go, as a gift for his little sister. It came in a some kind of box packed with magic ice, trapping the cold air inside and protecting it against the fierce heat capable of even evaporating water. After his sister tried some for herself, she too was of the same opinion as him. Ever since then, she continued to ask her older brother to bring her back ice cream every time he went to the restaurant. Shareef had clearly made a mistake.

The ice cream in the prince's float had soaked in the unique flavor of the cafa and slightly hardened due to the ice in the glass. It was just as he was enjoying this unique fusion that the bell on the door rang once more.

"Hm?"

Shareef looked toward the door and immediately froze in place.

"Good day, Master."

There stood the most beautiful of princesses. Unlike Shareef with his bronze skin, hers was a pure white, her cheeks red like roses, and her hair golden. Her eyes were as blue as the ocean itself, and her lips were a pale pink. She wore a rather plain dress, but its actual construction was clearly top class.

It was her.

"Welcome!" said the master. "Will you be having the usual?"

She considered it. "No, not today. Could I see your menu, please? I think I'd like to try one of your other parfaits today."

She was the reason Shareef became a regular here. He immediately sipped up the last of his cafa.

"Okay. Master, might I trouble you for a coffee jelly parfait?"

"You got it!"

The beautiful princess sat down at a table separate from Shareef. The young

prince couldn't help but follow her beautiful figure with his eyes. For some reason, he got the feeling that the last bit of cafa tasted sweeter than usual.

Hrm, it's gotten late.

It was just around the time that the sun was setting. Holding a box with the three different types of ice cream that his little sister requested, Shareef left the Restaurant to Another World behind him and returned to the Sand Nation.

She truly is the very definition of beautiful. What a wonderful day it has been!

Only recently had Shareef managed to discover the identity of the woman he so fondly thought of. She was a princess of the Empire, one of the few countries on the Eastern Continent that stood toe to toe with the Kingdom. She was the first princess, Adelheid, and she was more beautiful than any woman in the Sand Nation. The look of pure joy on her face as she enjoyed her parfait was nothing if not radiant.

Every time he saw her, he noticed that her once-pale face was regaining its color. She was overflowing with the liveliness of a girl her age. It was that which utterly charmed Shareef, lighting a fierce fire in his chest.

I really should talk to Father about this, he thought. Which means I need to win Renner over to my side.

Shareef, young but wise beyond his years, decided to enlist the help of his little sister. Renner was the apple of her father's eyes and could be a huge help in this situation. At the end of the day, Shareef was dealing with a princess of the Empire. While he was royalty in his own right, it certainly couldn't hurt to have more allies when talking about matters that would affect an entire continent.

Shareef sighed. *Oh, beautiful princess. Will you feel for me the way I feel for you?*

Shareef returned to the palace, his mind racing. The Sand Nation was located in the southern region of the Western Continent. It wouldn't be long before the prince would request the imperial princess's hand in marriage.

Chapter 20:

Breakfast Special Sunday mornings after a special business day always started with cleaning.

Normally, after the master handed the last guest her giant pot of beef stew, he made sure to clean up the kitchen to make sure it didn't get infested by bugs. This meant he usually ended up tidying the actual restaurant space the following day.

Truth be told, the reason he did this was to conserve his own energy. Ten years had passed since he inherited the restaurant from his grandfather. The life of a chef wasn't an easy one. Over the years, while he'd gotten much better at cooking, his stamina had dropped significantly.

Only recently had he started to feel his age, especially on Sundays following a solo Saturday shift.

Ain't got much choice, though. If I don't clean up now, I'm gonna be in trouble come Monday.

The master sucked it up and changed into his casual wear. He then used the elevator to go from his living space on the third floor to the kitchen on the first floor of the basement. Monday was the beginning of a new work week. The kitchen staff and waitresses he employed would be coming in. If he didn't finish cleaning up by then, he'd be late opening the restaurant. The special business day didn't really come to a close until he finished cleaning everything.

And so the master woke up at his usual time, by force of habit, and walked through the kitchen so that he could begin cleaning...

Only this time he stepped on something.

"Whoa!"

Whatever it was, it was soft to the touch. The master shouted out in surprise and immediately looked down at his feet.

"...Who the heck are you?"

There, directly below him, was a young girl he'd never seen before. As far as

the master could tell, she ended up falling asleep on the floor of his kitchen. After being stepped on, the girl slowly opened her eyes, lifting her upper body with a sleepy expression on her face. Next to her on the floor was an empty pot of leftover corn porridge that the master saved for breakfast.

“Mmm...?”

The young girl sat up on the floor, apparently still dazed and confused. She wore an old and battered long skirt along with a large hat that clearly didn't fit her. Poking out from beneath the hat was reddish, curly blonde hair. She didn't appear to be Japanese.

Oh, boy, the master thought. She's definitely from the other side.

Not only did she not look Japanese, she was wearing clothes no youngster on his side would ever wear. Perhaps more conclusive was the fact that he found her in his kitchen on a Sunday morning. It was clear as day she wasn't from his world. The master had heard from his precursor that the doors in the other world disappeared at the same time the date changed. He generally closed up shop and started cleaning at around ten at night, which meant she had two hours to wander in by accident. This kind of incident typically happened once or twice a year at most.

“Um... Where am I...?”

Meanwhile, the young girl shook her head a few times, causing her overly large hat to gently fall to the ground. Poking out from her curly hair were two small black horns.

The young girl remained dazed for some time, rubbing her reddish brown eyes with her hand before reaching up to her head, perhaps out of habit. After noticing her hat was gone, she immediately panicked and grabbed it off the ground, plopping it back on her head. After taking a moment to feel relieved, she looked up, saw the master, and immediately froze in place.

“Oh! I-I'm so sorry!”

The young girl seemingly remembered what she had done and proceeded to bow her head and apologize, once again resulting in her hat falling to the floor.

The master watched the young girl continue to panic.

“Now, now,” he said, having regained his own composure. “Calm down. Young lady, what’s your name? And why are you on my floor?”

“Oh, u-um... My name is Aletta,” she said, still clearly frazzled.

This is the story of how these two unlikely people came to meet for the very first time.

It was the middle of the night of the previous day.

“Ugh, I can’t sleep,” Aletta groaned.

Aletta had kept her eyes tightly closed in an attempt to fall asleep but finally gave up. She opened her eyes. Despite being tired from walking around the city looking for work all day, she just couldn’t get to sleep.

“I’m hungry...”

Just as she spoke, her stomach let out a sad growl. All she ate before lying down was a single cobbler’s tuber. For a young woman like Aletta, that wasn’t nearly enough food.

This was the gorgeous capital city of the Kingdom, a place said to be the most prosperous of cities in the world. Just outside of it were a series of abandoned ruins. About a hundred years prior, when the humans and demons were still at war, the demon king found his way in, and using the power of the dark lord he worshipped, changed the citizens into monsters loyal to him. This would prove to be a damaging strike against the capital city, and these ruins were the long-lasting scars of that event.

It was rumored that the humans who had turned into monsters still lived in the ruins, occasionally attacking and eating humans who found their way into the area. The only sorts of people brave or stupid enough to go there were outsiders who didn’t know its history or terrible criminals who were escaping their horrific fate. It was the worst place in the capital.

After Aletta lost both of her parents to disease, she left the village of her “people” to come to the capital. She didn’t see the point in living in a village surrounded by sterile land, especially as a young woman. Unfortunately for her,

life in the capital wasn't much better.

Part of this was certainly because she was just a young woman with no connections or anything to offer. The other, perhaps stronger element, was her face. Aletta was a demon.

Demons worshipped the dark lord, who sought to descend upon the planet and make it his own. They were his servants. While technically they were once a race similar to that of the humans, dwarves, and half-elves, worshipping the dark lord caused them to develop grotesque traits, resulting in their current physical forms. Their physical strength was far greater than any of the other races, and some even possessed magical powers exceeding that of the elves.

One of the abilities that believers of the dark lord received was the ability to control monsters.

For years upon years, the demon race brought terror upon the other races of the world, waging war after war.... up until about fifty years before Aletta was born, anyway.

It was around that time that the demon race decided to use their final trump card: the resurrection of the dark lord. But before he could regain his full powers, he was defeated by three courageous humans and one brave half-elf. The ambitions of the demon race had ended in failure.

The demon king, the mightiest of warriors and possessor of great strength and divine protection, gave his own life in order to summon the dark lord. When the human heroes defeated the lord of darkness, the demon race lost his powerful divine protection. While it hadn't vanished completely, what the demons were left with was weak in comparison. New demons born into the world possessed divine protections as weak as any human's.

And so the demon race, their strength and magical power greatly reduced, no longer could go to war with the other races. Some demons chose to live in places well off the beaten path, far from the eyes of others, while others cast away their divine protection, choosing to live undercover as humans in their towns and cities.

While Aletta was a demon, she was a weak one, closer in many ways to the humans. The only thing that really proved she was of the demon race were the

two small goat-like horns on her head. Otherwise, she was just an average young woman. This was precisely why she wore such a massive hat and decided to try and live in the capital.

Unfortunately, things didn't go her way.

Some seventy years had passed since the war against the dark lord. Most of the people who were present for the climactic battle of the demon war had long since moved on to the next world. People weren't nearly as hard on the remaining demons as they once were. If nothing else, being discovered didn't immediately result in a death sentence.

That said, demons were still heavily discriminated against. If one's identity were discovered at their place of work, they'd be fired without question. As for shelter, places like the aforementioned abandoned ruins were the only available room and board. When Aletta was discovered to be a demon, she was let go of her job and kicked out of her inn, leaving her homeless on the streets.

"Ugh," Aletta groaned again. "I'm so hungry..."

The nearly full moon was already high above in the sky, but Aletta still couldn't sleep, her stomach empty. She didn't have a single copper coin left to her name.

Up until that day, she had gotten along by doing all manner of difficult day-to-day jobs so she could eat, but she'd reached her limit. Aletta briefly considered her last resort for making money but quickly shook her head and reconsidered. She once again tried to get some sleep.

That's when it happened.

"Something smells good..." she said, catching a scent in the air.

Aletta instinctively raised her body. Even the trees and grass were fast asleep at this time. There was no way that this sweet aroma could really be food. Aletta began to check her surroundings, her drowsiness a thing of the past.

She turned, thinking she heard the sound of a cat, and saw something.

What?

That was when Aletta realized she was looking at a black door in the middle of

the ruins.

I don't remember there being a door there. Am I losing my mind?

The demon girl tilted her head in confusion. This was her fifth night sleeping in the ruins. Though she went out searching for work during the day, she always came back to sleep. She would have noticed a door like this days ago.

That smell is definitely coming from the door...

The void in Aletta's stomach made her sense of smell that much stronger. There was an aroma both sweet and unfamiliar coming from the opposite side of the door, and it was enough to make her mouth water. The cobbler's tuber she'd eaten earlier was already long gone from her stomach, prompting Aletta to unconsciously draw closer to the door.

"What is this? Some kind of cat?" she said.

The black door was lit by the moon up above. Aletta took a closer look at it. The handle was gold, and the door itself was made of black wood. On the front of it was an illustration of what appeared to be a cat.

The closer the demon girl looked, the clearer it became that the door was quite old. Be that as it may, it was in extremely good condition. Pressured by her empty stomach, she slowly turned the golden knob.

Ring, ring.

"Aaah!"

The sound of a bell ringing caught Aletta off guard, drawing a scream out of her.

"Th-that scared me..." she whispered.

The door had a bell attached to it. Beyond it was a dark room, nearly pitch black.

Ah, I smell something good.

The dark space in front of her was more than enough to make Aletta stop in her tracks. Yet still, the smell of food coming from within was too much, and she found herself stepping forward, closing the door behind her.

Aletta's sense of logic tried to stop her. She knew what she was doing was against the law. She knew it, but she couldn't help herself.

"It smells so good," she said.

The young demon girl hadn't had anything to eat besides cobbler's tubers and water. There was simply no way she could resist the warm, sweet smell of food. Aletta proceeded deeper into the room, dodging tables and chairs on the way.

What is this place?

Fortunately for Aletta, her eyes had long since become used to the dark, so she could just barely make out the layout of the room. There wasn't anybody present, but there were a number of mysterious silver doors all over.

What a weird place.

The first room was filled with tables and chairs, which wasn't altogether that strange. It was probably some kind of dining hall. This room of silver doors, however, was far beyond her comprehension. Aletta was left with one conclusion.

This was all just a dream.

Clearly, this was a dream brought about by hunger. Lots of things about it didn't quite make sense, but she was sure it was a dream.

The more Aletta thought about it, the more the pieces fit together. There was no way a pretty black door would just appear out of nowhere, and it was even more unlikely that there'd be a room of silver doors beyond it. This wasn't reality.

...If this is just a dream, then I should be okay, right?

Once Aletta convinced herself she was dreaming, she moved quickly. With her own conclusion as her shield, she started to act rashly. The demon girl made her way to a small copper pot sitting on a counter in the room. This was the origin of the delicious aroma she'd smelled earlier. Aletta immediately took the lid off.

"Wha...!"

The moment the lid was lifted, the delicious aroma rising from the pot engulfed Aletta. The metal container was filled with a sweet-smelling soup of

some kind. The moment she caught a whiff of it, her stomach let out a roar, like a beast stalking its prey.

...But isn't this a dream? Or maybe it's because it's a dream.

The aroma only further convinced Aletta that she was asleep. This smelled much like the famous “knight sauce” the capital was known for. On occasion, Aletta had the good fortune of smelling the soup from afar. It was an incredibly high-class food that couldn't be found in poor villages like the one she came from. Aletta had seen the soup in town before, but after seeing its cost, long since gave up on eating it. There was no doubt that it appeared in her dream as a result of her hunger.

Then it should be okay for me to try some, right? she reasoned.

Aletta swallowed the saliva building in her mouth and grabbed the ladle sitting in the pot. She scooped up some of the soup, noticed that it was filled with tiny grains of some kind, and took a sip of the sweet liquid.

“What is this?! I-It's so sweet!”

The demon girl gulped down the soup. The still-warm liquid not only had a dash of saltiness to it but also the flavor of milk. Above all else, however, it was sweet.

“Mm!” Aletta noisily smacked her lips and slurped down more soup.

This was the first time in Aletta's life that she had ever tasted something like this. Despite nearly choking multiple times, the girl continued to drink down the soup. She was completely smitten with its taste, being careful not to spill any of the priceless sustenance as she frantically devoured more of it.

The soup was smooth to the touch and sweet. The tiny grains mixed into the liquid produced their own delicious sweet juice when chewed on. All of this traveled down Aletta's throat and into her once empty stomach, warming her body up. She continued to use the large ladle to pour more soup into her mouth without stopping. There wasn't much of it to begin with, but it still disappeared in mere moments.

While it was unfortunate that the pot was now empty, Aletta let out a sigh of relief at having finally eaten her fill for the first time in ages. When was the last

time she'd felt this way? It was like she was in some wonderful dream... And then she remembered that she was dreaming and let out a laugh.

"Phew..."

A wave of drowsiness finally started to set in now that she had filled her stomach.

"Mm..." Aletta sighed wearily.

Sure that this was all a dream, Aletta let her sleepiness take hold of her as she laid down on the floor. It was hard but smooth, and the fact that it kept the cold air out meant this was comfortable enough for her to sleep on. The quiet sounds of Aletta's breathing echoed throughout the dark kitchen.

That is, until the master woke her up and she realized everything that had happened was real.

"...I see," said the master. "So you thought it was all a dream, then."

"Y-yes! I'm so sorry."

After hearing her tale, the master looked at the young girl. It was a gentle gaze, but she nonetheless recoiled in fear.

What should I do? she thought frantically. *I had no idea this was a sorcerer's mansion!*

Aletta trembled with fear, having realized what she had done. At this rate, she'd be passed over to the authorities and either locked in a cell forever or hanged.

Of course this was a magic user's home! The capital city of the Kingdom was known for being a city of great sorcerers. It made sense considering one of the legendary heroes who helped defeat the dark lord, Sage Altorius, made it his home. Why wouldn't there would be other talented sorcerers in the city?

Aletta had seen the middle-aged man before her use magic just moments earlier. The moment he pressed his hand against the wall, there was a clicking noise of some kind, and suddenly the room was filled with white light. Before he cast his spell, the room was as dark as the night itself, but now it was bright like the middle of the day. After seeing his skills in action, Aletta was forced to

confront reality: there was no way out for her. All she could do was tremble in fear and await her punishment.

“Well, I guess the corn porridge doesn’t really matter all that much...” the master mused.

It’d be one thing if she’d eaten something the master made for his customers, but this was just the leftovers he saved for himself. If he didn’t eat it, it was just going to go to waste. In that sense, he was relieved that it went to a good place.

“I’m actually pretty hungry myself,” he said.

Now that the master thought about it, after watching one of his regulars, the self-proclaimed Queen, take her giant pot of beef stew home, he spent the next two days working on the braised pork. He was so exhausted that all he had for dinner was something light. Any food he put in his stomach was long since gone.

The master was planning on making breakfast, so...

“Little lady, er, Aletta, right? Would you like something to eat?”

There was no way the master could make something for himself without feeding the young woman in front of him, so he asked her directly.

“Wh-wh-wh-what?! N-no way! I couldn’t! I-I don’t have any money on me, plus I’ve already caused so much trouble for you!”

The master attempted to calm the still frightened girl. “Hey, if you really feel that way, I’d actually prefer if you grabbed a bite. You don’t have to pay a thing. If anything, it’d feel awkward for me to eat alone. Food’s more delicious when you have someone to share the experience with, right?”

“...Okay. I-I’ll have some, then!”

Aletta instinctively nodded her head in response to the man’s kind words.

“Excellent. Let’s see... You just hang on for a bit.”

And so the master began to cook. He placed some soft bread into the oven and then went to the refrigerator and took out a few eggs and slices of bacon. He placed his pitch-black frying pan onto the stove and started the burner. First, he quickly cut the bacon pieces into thin strips and laid them on the frying pan,

causing them to release oils he would use for further cooking.

Salt, pepper, and a dash of milk and cheese... There we go.

Even though she wasn't technically a "customer," the master decided to treat her that way nonetheless. He paid close attention to getting the egg wash just right before pouring it into the frying pan. The middle-aged man then quickly mixed it all together before turning the flame off and trapping the air and half-cooked food underneath the lid of the pan. The master then turned his attention to loading a small bowl with chopped cabbage, cherry tomatoes, and dressing.

The master took the hot bread out of the oven and placed it on a dish with a clump of butter, and finally placed the soft eggs and bacon onto a separate plate, completing the meal.

"Here you go," he said. "This is our 'breakfast special.' We don't normally serve this to customers."

Aletta's eyes widened after looking down at the different plates of food in front of her. The master made it all look easy.

He's really good at cooking, she thought to herself.

The meal in front of her was better prepared than any she had seen before. Even the cooking of the master and mistress from her previous job couldn't compare. The way he put everything together felt like some sort of magic trick. Each step rolled into the next with impossible smoothness.

In front of her was a plate of eggs and smoked meat, as well as a bowl of finely cut green vegetables with some sort of red fruit on top. And that was to say nothing of the toasted bread and butter off to the side.

"Unfortunately," said the master, "this is all I can really offer you right now. I hope you like it."

He quickly grabbed a chair and took a seat.

"Itadakimasu," he said.

Aletta, on the other hand, put her hands together and offered prayer to her god.

“Thank you, oh Lord of Darkness, for this, my daily bread... Ah! F-forget I said anything!”

Seeing the master say what had to be a prayer had led Aletta to do so as well. She panicked. Aletta knew all too well that the dark lord she worshipped was feared by humans far and wide.

However, the master simply gave her a puzzled look. “Hm? What’s wrong? Not a fan of the food?”

He knew little of what went on beyond the door. All he knew for sure was that Aletta described herself as part of the demon race when she told him her story. The master didn’t know much about religion and the like, so all he really assumed was that demons probably had a dark lord they prayed to.

“O-oh, no, it’s nothing,” Aletta said.

Apparently the man in front of her didn’t fear the demon god. After realizing she’d said too much, she stuffed some bread in her mouth in an attempt to change the conversation.

She was stunned. “What is this?!” she said.

It was too soft, warm, and faintly sweet to be the bread that Aletta was familiar with. The wheat’s fragrant aroma traveled across the inside of her mouth. This was truly a feast in and of itself.

No way! This, and this, too?!

Her initial attempt to change the subject ended up being the trigger that made her excitedly devour her breakfast special. Everything in front of her was unbelievably delicious.

The fresh vegetables had none of the bitterness usually associated with them, and the liquid covering them was sour and salty. The tiny red fruit next to the greens wasn’t the least bit sweet; its perfect level of sourness bounced around the walls of her mouth. The quality of the vegetables overall was exceedingly high, considering it was autumn. The crunchy texture also made for a delightfully satisfying sound as she chewed. It was magnificent.

The smoked meat, likely the main dish, was also delightful. At first glance, it

looked like it had just been cooked over flames, but that was unlikely. Much of the oil had been drained from it, leaving behind only the savory quality of the meat. As a bonus, the salty flavor went extremely well with the bread.

And then there were the eggs. Never mind someone of Aletta's lower status, even regular citizens would rarely get to taste something as delicious as these. The master used up high-quality eggs like they were a dime a dozen. When he was cooking everything in the iron pan earlier, the eggs must have soaked up the juices from the meat he put in first in order to drain the grease. Just the eggs alone were enough to call this a feast of feasts, but then there was the salt, pepper, milk, and cheese that were added as additional flavoring. All of these elements came together to create a deliciousness that Aletta could barely describe in words.

The bread that Aletta first bit into was both soft and sweet, going together with every other food in the meal. Like so many other individual items in front of her, the bread by itself was delightful, but when combined with the other foods, its deliciousness was multiplied to an explosive degree. It didn't take long before both pieces of bread on Aletta's plate traveled to the bottom of her stomach.

"Do you want seconds?"

Aletta nodded her head so quickly that her hat almost fell off again.

"Ha ha ha, as a cook, seeing someone like you enjoy my cooking so much is what makes it all worth it."

The master wore a warm smile on his face as he watched Aletta ravenously devour her food. He handed her another piece of bread.

And so the two continued their meal until all the food atop their plates had vanished into thin air.

"That was amazing," Aletta said. She placed her metal fork on the plate and let out a sigh of satisfaction. The meal was so incredible that even the small traces of egg remaining on her plate seemed enticing. She wondered to herself if it was really okay to have such an extravagant meal so early in the morning.

"Aye, glad you enjoyed it."

Surprisingly, the master rarely had the opportunity to watch one of his customers enjoy his cooking up close and personal. As such, this rare occasion put him in an especially good mood. He hummed to himself while warming some soup in a small pot before pouring it into a slightly deeper-than-usual plate.

“Here, some hot soup. I had an extra can left over for staff meals, so.”

Aletta took the soup and was immediately entranced by its sweet flavor. The master then shot a question at her.

“Hey, Aletta. You said something about looking for work, right?”



“...Yeah.”

The master's question was enough to pull Aletta back to the struggles of reality. Her time with the master had let her momentarily forget that the only reason she was able to have this feast was because of the kind sorcerer sitting in front of her. It was nothing but good luck on her part. When this was all over, she would once more have to continue her hunt for work.

What am I going to do?

It was just as Aletta began to come down from her momentary happiness that the master raised his voice again.

“If I remember correctly, you said you worked as a waitress before, right?”

“Huh? U-um, yes,” she answered, somewhat puzzled.

That was correct. When she was telling the master her story, she remembered mentioning that she'd been fired from her job working as a waitress at an inn.

“Well, if you'd like, would you want to work here once a week, er, every seven days?”

Aletta immediately raised her head.

The master continued. “You'd be working from dawn till dusk. As for what you'd be doing, you'd handle bringing the orders out to customers and taking care of dishes and the like. Oh, but you wouldn't be handwashing anything. I have a dishwashing machine here, so you don't gotta worry about that. Let's see, in terms of wages, we can treat this like you're a student part-timer, so... One day'd be like 10,000 yen. Over there, that'd be just around ten silver coins.”

“Th-that much?! Just for doing that sort of work?!”

Aletta was shocked at how much he was willing to pay her for the kind of work he expected. Normally, someone with no education or strength, never mind a demon like her, would grind themselves into dust for a day and receive ten copper coins at best.

Ten copper coins were equal to a single silver coin. And he was going to pay

her 10 of those? A young woman like herself could potentially live a whole month off of that much.

“Yup,” he said. “Including break time, you’d be working a pretty long fourteen-hour shift, so. If you’re not used to that kind of work, it might be a little rough on you. Oh, and you’ll get three staff meals every time you’re here.”

“I-I’ll do it! Please let me work here! Please!”

Aletta nodded her head not once, not twice, but multiple times. This must’ve been good fortune granted to her by the god of demons who watched over her. If she let this chance go, all that waited for her was death. She nodded with all her might.

The master smiled. “Great! Then it’s a deal. For today, let’s just have you watch. I’ll teach you everything you need to know, so make sure to keep it memorized. This is work, so I want you to take it seriously. Also, we have a uniform here, so whenever you come in, you gotta wear it, all right? I’ll be counting on you starting next week.”

“Yes, of course!”

This was how a new worker was welcomed into the Restaurant to Another World’s staff. She was a demon girl with tiny goat horns who wore otherworldly attire.

The waitress of the Restaurant to Another World.

The following Saturday, the young woman would find herself terribly surprised by the restaurant’s customers on her first work day.

Her story had only just begun.

Special Chapter:

Braised Pork It was five minutes until lunchtime. Yamada, an office worker now in his fifth year, looked at the clock on the wall of his office and then unlocked his smartphone and pulled up one of his favorite sites. He scrolled down the well-designed page and clicked on “Daily Special Report.”

Let's see... Chikurinan has a tsukimi soba and gomoku inari zushi set. The Laughing Dragon's A-set is sweet and sour pork, and the B-Set is Chinese gomoku chow mein... Kazama Lunches has a fried chicken lunch that's fifty yen off...

Yamada had accessed an official homepage run by the neighborhood's shopping district. It featured a map of the area, explanations of all the different shops, and even had staff blogs that were admittedly pretty boring. There was one specific page on the site that was updated daily, and it was the one with the most traffic.

The page's name was “Daily Special Report.” It displayed the lunch special of every eatery in the shopping district for that day.

On the plus side, the list of “today's lunch specials” was clear and to the point. On the negative side, it was overly simple. For your average office worker, lunchtime on a weekday was one of the few exciting parts of the day. It was important.

The restaurants in the area were tasked with feeding the mouths of nearly every office worker who worked nearby, and there were a lot of them. About half of the shops in the district were eateries of some kind, with the remainder being grocery stores and the like.

The office district in the area was home to some one hundred employees, and they all made their way to the shopping district on the weekdays, lining up to grab a bite. Despite how many customers there were to feed, there were barely any first-timers at the various restaurants. At some point or another, every worker had tried out every eatery lining the district. With so much competition,

it was an endless scramble for business. As a result, any places that “survived” were considered to be of an extremely high level of quality. That’s why Yamada could rest easy looking at the Daily Special Report in order to choose his lunch.

Hm... which one should I get? ...Oh?

Yamada stopped his finger on the screen.

Western Cuisine Nekoya. Today’s daily special is “braised pork.”

What a bizarre choice for a restaurant that described itself as serving western cuisine.

Braised pork, eh?

Nekoya’s daily special list was distinctly more whimsical than the others, often offering dishes that weren’t even on their main menu. Sometimes they were sets that complemented the season or plates that couldn’t be served daily because of the time they took to prepare. There were all sorts of reasons for the seemingly random choices, but the one thing Yamada knew was that you couldn’t go wrong with this kind of “rare menu item.”

But seriously, a western cuisine joint? Hm? Actually, wait a second.

Yamada suddenly remembered one of the senior employees at his company that retired some five years ago. After graduating from his local high school and finding work, the man spent forty years of his life at the same company. Even around the time he joined up, he was already a big Nekoya fan. Yamada remembered what he said to him way back when.

“The braised pork the former master served was one of a kind. When I was younger, I’d have a slice of that good stuff over rice, but it went great with booze, too.”

Yamada could feel his mouth watering. He joined the company after the current master took over and hadn’t yet gotten the opportunity to eat the supposedly sublime braised pork. That said, he went to Nekoya quite often, so he was more than aware of how good the food there was. But he often found himself puzzled by its menu. Despite its name, it served anything and everything. Maybe it was for that exact reason that it was famous in the district for serving “delicious food.”

If the master felt comfortable putting something on the menu as a daily special, Yamada was confident that it probably tasted amazing. The incredible braised pork that the senior office worker told him about was the rarest of rare dishes. Yamada couldn't let this chance pass him by. The moment the lunch bell rang, he immediately stood up from his chair.

...Almost simultaneously, the section chief, ten years Yamada's senior at the company, stood up as well. Their eyes met, and the younger employee could feel it.

Nekoya's gonna be damn crowded today...

Yamada was right about two things. Nekoya was, in fact, super crowded that day. He was also right about the braised pork.

In order to understand the full depths of this tale, one must travel back ten days in time to the very beginning of the story.

"A pork dish so tender that it couldn't possibly be from our world, you say?"

Mashira was both Yuuto's master and the most famous boar hunter in the area. The middle-aged hunter looked at the older samurai in front of him, puzzled.

"Indeed. It all happened some twenty years ago. When I was in the middle of a mission, I found myself a visitor to this land. It was then that I met an older hunter who lived in these parts: your master. He treated me to quite the feast. It was a pork dish that was as tender as it was sweet."

Denemon, the older samurai who was once a general in the capital city, sagely nodded his head. The folds of wrinkles on his face were proof of his age, just as his once-black head of hair and beard were now ash gray. Despite his age, however, his arms were as thick as tree trunks. He gave off the air that his skills hadn't degraded in the least.

The old samurai had passed his own position down to his son and retired from active duty. The other day, he visited this town holding the head of an ogre that he killed himself, trading it in for some money. On the Eastern Continent, if one brought proof of having slayed a man-killing ogre, hunters could receive a

cash reward. The fact that this older man was able to do so meant that his skill as a swordsman had not yet dwindled. He was a true samurai.

The samurai class ruled the Mountain Nation. In the neighboring Ocean Nation, generals who had never held a sword in their entire life ran the country. The king standing at the top of the government had never once gone to the battlefield himself in order to lead his men. The Mountain Nation, however, was different. The samurai protected and ran the country, just as they stood on the front lines leading their men. If one was incapable of taking down an ogre on their own, they were not fit to stand above others.

The older samurai was born and raised in the Mountain Nation and towered above the other strong warriors of his nation. He had the skills to prove it, too.

“I have achieved glory and passed down my house,” he said. “My grandchild has even come of age. At this point, I can die with no regrets to my name. Perhaps this is precisely why I want to eat that one dish I ate so long ago. It’s why I’m here on this very day. Might you know where I can find this dish of dishes?”

Mashira thought quietly to himself after lending an ear to Denemon’s tale. *Let me see, I don’t recall Master ever telling me about a dish like that in this... Wait, actually...*

Something came to mind, and the hunter shot a question at the samurai. “Excuse me, Lord Denemon. I have but one question. Did you perchance happen to eat that pork dish after crossing through an eastern-style black door in the mountains?”

It was less of a question and more of a confirmation. In this small village far from the city, there was only one place he could imagine that would serve something that could not be found in the city.

Mashira realized that Denemon was likely being careful with his words. The samurai slyly smiled and nodded his head.

“Correct! That I did! Now that I think about it, it was indeed a place like that!”

“I see. In that case, is it possible for you to wait three days?”

“Three, you say?”

Denemon seemed puzzled. He apparently didn't know the details of how the door worked.

"Yes. That restaurant is only open once every seven days on the Day of Satur. That's but three days from now. If you wait until then, you'll be able to go."

Indeed. If one wanted to eat food that wasn't of this world, it only made sense to go to a restaurant from another world. However, in three days time, Denemon would be met with the painful sting of disappointment.

"Say what?! You no longer make it?!" Denemon's loud voice echoed throughout the small restaurant.

"I'm very sorry. The braised pork was actually the previous master's specialty."

One of the master's regulars brought with him a man who requested a menu item that hadn't been made in years. He had scrubbed it from the menu after he took over the restaurant. There were a few reasons as to why this happened. One of them was that it didn't really match the image of a western cuisine restaurant, and the other was that it took a great deal of time to make. Also...

"To be honest, I just never felt like I was able to replicate the same flavor my precursor's braised pork had. That's why I don't serve it," the master explained.

When he had inherited the restaurant, the current master's cooking skills were nowhere near his precursor's. The one thing he had confidence in was western cuisine, mostly thanks to how hard he trained so that he could come in to run the restaurant at any given time.

The reality was that the previous master had lived off of his cooking abilities for some sixty years after the war ended. His culinary knowledge was as vast as it was deep. The current master wasn't confident that he could serve something other than western cuisine to customers who knew what his precursor's cooking tasted like. He wasn't convinced that they'd like it.

That's why he'd quietly erased braised pork from the menu. He wasn't confident enough in his own abilities.

"Is that so? That's unfortunate, but I understand your reasoning. One cannot win against the passage of time, I suppose," said Denemon. The samurai's

shoulders dropped in disappointment. Now that he thought about it, the last time he had the braised pork was nearly twenty years ago. Back then, the previous master was already as old as Denemon was now. It made sense that he was no longer of this world.

Denemon sighed, full of emotion. Someone he once knew was no longer of this world, and something he once had was no longer within reach. It was a sigh that came from a deep sense of loneliness.

After seeing the samurai's expression darken, the master couldn't help but raise his voice.

"...Do you think you could wait a week, er, seven days?"

"Hm? Seven days, you say? But why? I suppose since I'm retired, I have naught but time on my hands."

The master steeled his resolve and replied to the puzzled Denemon. "Braised pork takes a great deal of time and effort to prepare, so there's no way I could serve it to you today. But if you give me seven days, I can have it ready for you by next Saturday."

"Say what? Are you serious?! I am most grateful! Of course, I'd be happy to wait!" Denemon's eyes widened at the master's words. He nodded his head, unable to conceal his joy.

"All right."

The master's expression was somewhat stiff. In seven days, he'd be able to prepare braised pork. By saying these words out loud, he was forcing himself to stay the course. There would be no turning back.

I'm pretty sure the recipe's in Gramps's book, he thought. Which means the question is whether or not I can match his flavor or even surpass it.

The master would revive braised pork in seven days. No matter what.

"Now then, I am most happy that I get to eat that amazing dish once more in my life. Sir Mashira, what other dishes would you recommend?"

"Heh, in that case, I'd recommend 'ginger pork.' I reckon it'd be right up your alley."

Denemon was in extremely high spirits as he listened to his hunter companion's recommendation. *I can't believe it. I get to eat it once more.*

The samurai munched away on the ginger pork he ordered, recommended to him by the hunter who was a regular of the restaurant. The cooked meat was indeed tender, and it went magnificently with the delicious pure white rice served on the side. And yet still he thought of that one magical dish. Twenty years ago, he was stunned that something so incredible existed in this world. He was overcome with the joy of knowing he would once more be able to eat braised pork.

And so, seven days later, the familiar sound of bells ringing echoed throughout the restaurant.

"Master, I've arrived!"

Denemon, with Mashira in tow, announced his arrival. He never knew that seven days could feel so long. That's why he was so excited.

"Aye, welcome!"

The master, his eyes red from a lack of sleep, showed the pair to their table. "That'll be two orders of braised pork, right?"

"Indeed! Thank you!"

The master confirmed the order, and Denemon nodded in response. He was going to be able to eat that magical dish again. When he started thinking about it, his mouth began to water.

"Curses, must we still wait?! Is this not taking too long?!"

"Now, now. We only just placed our orders."

Denemon had begun to grow impatient due to the size of his own expectations, but Mashira chuckled and kept him grounded. After a brief period of time, the master came out of the kitchen holding their meals on a tray.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Your order of braised pork."

The plate the master placed down in front of Denemon was deeper than usual. On top of it lay a light brown boiled egg and radish that had soaked up the brown juices. Next to those was a serving of bright green, boiled spinach,

and large slices of pork meat.

“Oooh! Oooh! This is it! This is the meal I’ve waited years for!”

The sweet fragrance wafting up from the meat was enough to remind the samurai of his initial shock back when he first ate the dish. He immediately grabbed a pair of chopsticks. Even ignoring the main focus of the meal, this was quite the feast. The radish had soaked in the savory flavor of the pork, and the egg overflowed with golden yellow yolk after being split open. Yet still, the true star here was the pork meat. Denemon reached for it with his chopsticks, zero hesitation in his movements.

Usually, this kind of thick meat was difficult for even the tough-jawed citizens of the Mountain Nation to comfortably chew through. Instead, Denemon’s chopsticks cut through the meat as if it were made of water.

“Huh, well isn’t this a surprise! I didn’t think pork meat could get this tender,” Mashira said, surprised by the meat’s lack of toughness. Ginger pork was another meat dish that came in slices, and while that too was tender and easy to cut into with chopsticks, it wasn’t nearly as thick as the meat on Denemon’s plate. Mashira didn’t think something like that could be so tender.

Denemon inspected the large piece of pork meat. The dark brown juices colored the meat and the transparent fat and skin above it. *Mm, the color and fragrance leave no room for doubt*, he thought.

The meat gave off a slight, sweet aroma. This was indeed the same color and scent as the feast he once enjoyed. They were enough to remind him of the flavor he experienced so many moons ago, causing his mouth to water. The samurai quickly brought the meat to his mouth.

It melted.

The moment Denemon put the meat into his mouth, it immediately melted. The layer of fat dissolved before he could even bite into it, and the skin that should have been hard left behind nothing but savoriness as it disappeared from existence. The pork meat that absorbed the flavor of the sweet and sour sauce came undone in his mouth, leaving behind a savory aftertaste.

Mm? This is on a whole different level!

As the flavor of the sweet and sour pork weaved its way throughout his mouth, Denemon was stunned by the memories of when he first ate it years ago. He was moved to action. The samurai reached for the bowl of pure white rice off to the side and began to shovel the fluffy grains into his mouth. The savory flavor of the braised pork mixed with the sweetness of the rice, increasing the deliciousness of both tenfold. This fusion of flavors convinced Denemon that there wasn't anything in the world as delicious as what he was eating at that very moment.

Yes, yes! This was what I longed to eat all these many years! True deliciousness!



Twenty years ago, the hunter who invited him to the restaurant told him that the braised pork and white rice went incredibly well with the other world's strong seishu alcohol. He was right. The combination of sweet rice, surprisingly spicy alcohol, and braised pork made for a taste that one could only experience in another world. Denemon glanced over at his friend Mashira. He was completely silent.

The hunter was quietly moving his chopsticks back and forth, devouring the braised pork one moment, a radish the next, followed by the egg and rice. He occasionally took bites of the boiled spinach and the sauce that smelled ever-so-slightly of the ocean, also clearing his palate with the salty and spicy radish on one of the other plates. Mashira stopped for nothing.

"Master, another plate, please!"

The hunter asked for seconds, almost as if he forgot that Denemon was sitting right in front of him.

Mm, I won't lose to him.

Denemon sped up his own eating. He feasted on the high-quality pork meat, the boiled egg that spilled forth its golden insides once cut, and the radish that soaked in the juices.

With each bite of the meal, more rice vanished into his stomach. It didn't take long for Denemon's bowl to empty out.

"Master, I too would like seconds on the rice! And drink as well! Bring me one bottle of chilled seishu!" If he remembered correctly, the hunter from back then left behind a little mountain shack near the black door so that he could sleep should he drink too much. Old memories were coming back to life inside Denemon.

What the master brought out wasn't the sort of cloudy alcohol the samurai was used to drinking; it was clear. The transparent alcohol had the scent of rice and went down smoothly but was also incredibly hot and strong.

The strong booze melded well with the sweet and sour pork.

Ah, this is no good.

He took a sip of booze, a bite of braised pork, a sip of booze, a bite of braised pork, a mouthful of rice, and then more braised pork. Denemon continued this loop until he was drunk and his stomach pleasantly satisfied. Yet somehow, his chopsticks didn't stop moving, at least not until his stomach could handle no more.

And so the master was able to revive one of Nekoya's greatest menu items, and Denemon was reunited with the meal of his dreams after twenty long years. He ate and drank his fill, and by the evening, he proclaimed that he would spend the night in the shack so that he could sober up. His face was bright red as he hung over his hunter friend's shoulders and returned home.

After watching the two drunk men leave the restaurant, the master handed over the giant pot of beef stew to the Red Queen, as per the usual.

"Geez, I can't believe I made it in time."

With the restaurant closed and the customers gone, silence settled over Nekoya as the master stretched his arms out wide.

"Man, I should not be pulling all-nighters at this age."

He sighed to himself while rolling his stiff shoulders. The fact that he ended up having to make even more braised pork than he initially planned for left him an exhausted mess. His original plan was to offer the meal as a daily special on Friday and then serve the leftovers on Saturday. What he didn't expect was that he would sell out of the stuff on Friday.

"I guess Gramps's braised pork really was that popular..."

All of this just served as yet another reminder that his grandfather truly was an amazing man. When he was forced to inherit the restaurant after his grandfather's sudden death, braised pork was one of the handful of dishes he took off the menu because he didn't think he could replicate the flavor. At the time, people were disappointed over the change, but he never thought that all these years later there would still be fans of the dish on both sides of the door.

"I suppose I'll serve it as a daily special on another Friday," the master whispered to himself.

The customers who came on Friday really seemed to enjoy the braised pork.

There were even some who complained that they couldn't drink with it because it was the middle of the day, so they came back that night to eat it again.

Of course, part of this was because it was a dish that had been gone from the menu for some ten years, but the fact that it was popular with the young folks who were only familiar with the current version of Nekoya made the master genuinely happy.

"But whew, I'm beat. I don't even have an appetite."

The master let out a satisfied sigh. Preparing more braised pork after closing shop on Friday and then running Saturday's business took its toll on the man in his late thirties. He glanced over at the corn porridge he saved for dinner.

I'm more sleepy than hungry.

He decided to grab a fast shower and hop into bed. He would have plenty of time to eat in the morning. The master turned the lights off and headed to the elevator that would take him to his home on the third floor.

Ring, ring.

The sound of the bell filled the dark room, announcing the arrival of a new customer.

TO BE CONTINUED IN

Restaurant to Another World Vol. 2



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